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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

THE ABDUCTION SYNDICATE

He took out a small phial of dark fluid, and a hypodermic syringe which he deliberately proceeded to fill.

NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY
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The Abduction Syndicate;

OR,

NICK CARTER AGAINST THE SHORT INTEREST.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

AN AUDACIOUS VISITOR.

Nick Carter was seated alone in his study when Joseph, his servant, brought in the man's card. Nick had heard the slowing down of a taxicab at the curbing outside, and was not surprised when he beheld the modest, neatly engraved card of his visitor. It smacked of exceeding gentility, of the unassuming sort, and bore the name "Leopold Duchane." In the lower left-hand corner was written with a pen "The Athens."

Nick viewed the card thoughtfully for a moment.

"I will see him here, Joseph, in about three minutes," he said significantly.

"Yes, sir," Joseph bowed, withdrawing. "I understand, sir."

Nick touched an electric button on his desk. It brought his chief assistant, Chick Carter, almost immediately, at an opposite door from that leading into the hall, through which Joseph had departed.

"Something doing?" queried Chick tersely.

Nick handed him the card.

"I know only what this imparts," he replied. "One who calls on a cold December night, however, should have important business. Sit down and we'll see what Mr. Leopold Duchane has to say."

Chick took an easy-chair and a newspaper, burying himself behind the latter as if he had been there since dinner.

Nick surveyed with an immediate increase of curiosity the man whom Joseph presently ushered into the room. There was that about the stranger which somehow commanded more than a mere cursory interest.

Mr. Leopold Duchane was an erect, somewhat imposing man in the neighborhood of fifty, with a distinguished air and an attractive face. He had regular features, an intellectual brow, brilliant eyes, a profusion of wavy brown hair, with a full flowing beard and mustache of the same hue.

He was exceedingly well-dressed, a black Prince Albert, a silk hat, seal-brown gloves, and a rich frieze overcoat. A small, but costly solitaire gleamed in his cravat. His linen was immaculate. His shoes were perfectly polished. He wore a boutonnière of violets.

Bowing when he entered, he looked from one to the

other, smiling and saying affably, with inquiring accent:

"Mr. Carter? The detective?"

"I am he," said Nick. "Will you remove your overcoat, Mr. Duchane?"

"I will, thank you, that I may feel it when I go out. It's a sharp night. Thank you."

The last was to Joseph, as he took the overcoat and glistening silk hat and withdrew.

"Take the chair near the fireplace, Mr. Duchane," said Nick, with a wave of his hand. "This is one of my associates in business, Chick Carter."

"Ah, very pleased," bowed Duchane. "You are brothers, perhaps."

"No, we are not related."

"Shall I remain?" questioned Chick perfunctorily.

"Unless Mr. Duchane wishes to consult me privately."

"No, no, not at all, Mr. Carter, though I consider my business important," said Duchane volubly. "You may regard it differently, of course, yet I could not but feel that you would be interested in it—and in me."

"Possibly," said Nick briefly.

"I do not mean, however, to appear egotistical," Duchane quickly added, as he sat down. "I have, for some time, been seriously considering the feasibility of a somewhat audacious project, which first occurred to me several months ago. The profits to be derived from it would, I am convinced, be enormous. I'm equally sure, after having carefully weighed every contingency, that it is perfectly practical."

"Haven't you mistaken your man, Mr. Duchane?" Nick asked dryly.

"Mistaken him?"

"I am not a capitalist, financier, nor promoter. I am a detective."

"Ah, to be sure!" Duchane exclaimed, smiling and lifting his brows. "Being a detective—I might say, if you will pardon the personality, being the greatest American detective—you are, as you will presently see, the very man I should first consult."

Nick Carter ignored the compliment. It did not seem to have the true ring. Supersensitive when in intercourse with strangers, and quick to interpret rightly the subtle impressions he received, there was something about Mr. Leopold Duchane that the detective did not fancy, certain sinister elements which his aristocratic exterior and insinuating blandishments failed entirely to mask.

"Come to the point, Mr. Duchane," he said. "What is this project you have up your sleeve?"

"Up my sleeve is right, Mr. Carter, for I have not yet taken the first step toward executing it," Duchane replied. "I soon shall do so, however. Stated briefly, Mr. Carter, as well as frankly—I am about to begin a career of crime."

"Holy smoke!" thought Chick. "Here's a chap with a crust, for fair. Is he dippy, or what?"

Nick eyed the man more sharply, also inclined to size him up as a crank, or a madman.

"Begin a career of crime?" he echoed inquiringly.

"Yes."

"I'll give you a straight tip, Mr. Duchane."

"A straight tip?"

"Yes. If you are wise, you will act upon it."

"Well?"

"Don't do it."

"Do what, Mr. Carter?"

"Begin a career of crime."

Duchane laughed. It was a quiet, curiously cold laugh, utterly void of any mirthful quality. He did not reply for a moment, but stroked the spotless kid gloves, which he had removed and laid over his knee, then lifted the lapel of his coat and sniffed the dainty violets in the buttonhole.

"I appreciate your advice, Mr. Carter," he said presently. "Coming from one of your vocation, it ought to have weight, and, perhaps, should cause me to relinquish my purpose. I have considered it very carefully, however, and am not to be deterred."

"I can see your finish, then," Nick said bluntly.

"Yes?"

"A prison cell—if not a worse fate."

"I suppose you would say so," smiled Duchane. "Only a very small percentage of criminals, however, go to prison—or to a worse fate."

"Our crowded penal institutions evince quite the contrary, Mr. Duchane."

"Yet, as I have asserted, they contain only a very small percentage of our criminals, consisting chiefly of persons of inferior ability and mental capacity. Very few men of genius go to prison."

"I disagree with you. Some of the brightest men I have known were crooks."

"Is that so?"

"I remember one, in particular, who now is serving a life sentence in Sing Sing."

"A genius?"

"Yes, in his evil way. He is a man of remarkable natural ability, with a broad education, a traveler, a scientist and—knave."

"You interest me."

"Yet, for all that, he was convicted of killing a girl on the street and sent to Sing Sing for life."

"Poor fellow!" said Duchane; then, smiling: "Do you imagine that he, if really a genius, will remain there?"

"Remain there!" Nick quietly exclaimed. "Most life convicts do, Mr. Duchane."

"Yes, to be sure."

"I do not believe that Manuel Vasca will be an exception."

"Is that his name?"

"Yes. Manuel Vasca."

Duchane laughed again. For the hundredth part of a second there appeared in his squinted eye a gleam too intense and subtle to be verbally described. It came and went like a flash, however, and was not perceptible to either detective.

"Well, this Manuel Vasca may be the exception that proves the rule," he replied, after a moment. "Be that as it may, the world is full of criminals who, as I have implied, will never suffer legal punishment. Viewed from a moral standpoint, the stock broker who designedly deceives his credulous customer is a thief; the physician who takes advantage of the foibles of his patient is a crook; the legislator who casts his vote only for the fee of the lobbyist——"

"One moment," Nick bluntly interrupted. "I am not inclined, nor have I the time, to undertake to show you in how far you may be wrong. Come to the point, Mr. Duchane. You had an object in calling on me. What is it?"

Duchane smiled and bowed, unruffled by the detective's curtness.

"You are right, Mr. Carter," he said. "I have two objects in calling on you. First, I wish to describe briefly my felonious project, and learn what you think of it. You are a man of experience and judgment, and your opinion will be of value. I am prepared to pay your price for it, of course; shall be very glad to do so, in fact."

"Do I understand," said Nick; "that you wish to tell me about the crime with which you intend to begin your evil career?"

"Precisely."

"Aren't you taking long chances?"

"Of what?"

"That I shall take advantage of your information, and either prevent the crime, or run you down for committing it."

"Oh, no!" Duchane laughed softly. "I shall guard against both."

"Possibly," Nick said dryly. "You are displaying an audacity, at all events, that is so new and novel that I am willing to hear what you have to say."

"Ah, I hoped that you would."

"Continue, Mr. Duchane. What is your felonious scheme?"

Duchane drew forward in his chair and proceeded more earnestly.

"I am going to organize what I shall term—an abduction syndicate."

"Syndicate, eh?"

"Yes. My associates in the enterprise will consist of several sturdy, capable men, who will have both the brains and muscular strength to execute, always with proper consideration and discretion, the instructions I shall give them."

"As president of the syndicate, I suppose?" said Nick dryly.

"Exactly. I may also include one or more women of superior tact and seductive beauty, whom I foresee may be employed to great advantage."

"As bait, so to speak."

"If you like that word," smiled Duchane.

Nick laughed, while Chick grinned broadly, both somewhat amused by their visitor's pretensions.

"And whom do you propose to abduct?" Nick inquired. "Are you going so far, even, as to tell me that?"

"Oh, yes," Duchane bowed, with an indifferent gesture. "I never do things by halves. I shall disclose any details in which you may feel an interest. We shall abduct only one class of individuals."

"Namely?"

"A few multimillionaires."

"Ah."

"Several of the big men of Wall Street, the magnates of the industrial world."

"Well, that will be fine," said Nick, a bit derisively. "You've framed up a great scheme, Mr. Duchane. I've no doubt that you'll find it perfectly easy to get away with as many of these multimillionaires and magnates as you can use to advantage. I suppose you'll go after them with a net, like a dog catcher after a mongrel. Having landed them, I presume you will force them to pay you a big ransom for their liberation?"

Nick's sarcasm was not resented. It fell like drops of water on a duck's back. Duchane listened without interrupting, smiling all the while, and replied as complacently as if discussing the opening of a bottle of "extra dry."

"Not much force will be required. I judge, Mr. Carter, that you do not appreciate the remarkable opportunities of the present time."

"Why the present time?"

"We have enjoyed, as you know, a period of unusual business prosperity. It has stimulated speculation. Railway and industrial securities have been very active. Wall Street has been on a speculative bat, so to speak, and stocks have been boomed to very high figures. This big bull movement is near its height."

"That is true," Nick admitted.

"It is equally true that the public, whose appetite for inflated securities is frequently insatiable, has been fighting shy of the recent market. The big men have boomed and accumulated the stocks, but they are not able to unload their vast holdings. They must do one of two things: They must allow the market to break, and thereby suffer enormous losses, or they must peg it at this present level, at least, until the public can be enticed into relieving them of their accumulated stocks."

"That, I confess, appears to be the existing situation," said Nick.

"Certainly," smiled Duchane. "And the market is never more sensitive than under such conditions. I propose to take advantage of that. The mysterious disappearance of a single big man from Wall Street, to say nothing of half a dozen, would cause the market to react. It would, in fact, break wide open. Prices would drop with meteoric velocity. A stampede would follow. A panic would result. Only the reappearance of the missing market leaders could check the ruinous reaction."

"Having them in your clutches," Nick interposed; "you reason that each will eagerly pay you a large sum for his liberty, in order that the violent depreciation of their securities may be prevented."

"That's it exactly," bowed Duchane. "A million each, at least. That would be nothing compared with their losses in such a market crash."

"True," Nick again allowed.

"My project is perfectly plain, then," Duchane said glibly. "It is, too, entirely feasible. The abduction of several of the big bull leaders will be comparatively simple. Their submission to my terms is inevitable. They will have no reasonable alternative. My profits are assured. They will be enormous. I shall become, in turn, a multimillionaire."

Duchane drew up in his chair while speaking, proudly, triumphantly, and fell to rubbing his hands. His eyes glowed with anticipation. His assurance was unqualified. He meant all he had said, and had not a doubt of his ultimate success.

"Tell me frankly, Mr. Carter," he cried. "What do you think of it?"

"I think it a very villainous scheme," Nick said curtly.

"Ah, to be sure! I expected you would. Nevertheless——"

"One moment," Nick interrupted. "You now have disclosed your project. With what other object have you called on me?"

Duchane laughed again in his cold, mirthless fashion.

"I will explain," he replied. "I foresaw that you, Mr. Carter, when my designs are fairly under way, are the man who most likely will be employed to controvert them and run me down. I wanted to meet and talk with you, therefore, that I might get the measure of the man with whom I must cope."

"Ah, I see." Nick's brows were knitting ominously.

"I wanted you to meet me, also, that I might outline my plans and relieve you of subsequent uncertainty concerning the great crime and the identity of the criminal," Duchane added, with brazen audacity. "I want no advantage over you, Mr. Carter. I have, therefore, felt compelled to be perfectly frank. I know you appreciate it. This puts us, you see, on an equal footing. You know me; I know you. That is as it should be."

"Anything more, Mr. Duchane?"

"I think that is all—unless you wish to question me about the details of my plans."

Nick's only reply was to ring for his servant.

Duchane arose unruffled, bowing and smiling, and drew on his gloves.

"Call on me; you have my card, Mr. Carter," he said. "I lunch at one and dine at six. I should be delighted to entertain you. A little later, perhaps, I will go a step farther. I will inform you by letter, if not personally, when I am about to begin my career of crime. You then will be prepared to get after me with as little delay as——"

"Joseph, show Mr. Duchane the door."

CHAPTER II.

NICK RUNS DOWN DUCHANE.

Chick Carter burst out laughing when the bang of the outer door announced that Mr. Leopold Duchane had departed.

"Well, that's what I call a display of colossal nerve," he cried. "Could anything be more audacious, more absurd? The idea that a man, designing to commit such a crime, should come here and tell us about it. What do you make of it? Is the fellow a crank, Nick, or to be taken seriously?"

Nick Carter had no liking for such presumption on the part of a visitor, and the frown with which he had ejected Duchane still lingered on his strong, clean-cut face.

"Whether taken seriously or not, there is nothing we could do," he replied. "Mere contemplation of a crime does not warrant detaining a man. If arrested, he could deny that he has any such design, and he could not be held."

"He spoke of beginning a career of crime," said Chick. "Evidently, then, he has no previous record."

"Possibly not," Nick said thoughtfully. "Nevertheless, I felt in a vague way that I had seen him before. But I could not place him."

"He did not appear to be in disguise."

"If so, his make-up was absolutely perfect. I could not detect any sign of it."

"What do you think of his scheme?"

"It's not as feasible as he imagines. He'll discover that at some cost, if he undertakes it."

"But what object can he have had in telling us about it?" asked Chick perplexedly. "It's not reasonable to suppose that he disclosed his true motive."

"There are three theories consistent with his conduct. One, that he is only a crank, unworthy of serious consideration."

"Certainly not in that case."

"Another, assuming he meant what he said, that his visit was only a bluff, and he a contemptible four-flusher, of that variety which enjoys defying a detective when it may be done with safety."

"Possibly."

"A third theory is much more probable," Nick added. "By thus drawing suspicion upon himself, which he particularly emphasized, he may be aiming to divert it from somebody else. That's an old scheme for throwing a detective off the track of the true criminals."

"By Jove, that may have been his motive," Chick cried. "Wouldn't it be wise to get after him and make sure of his identity?"

"If he's as slick as he pretended, he did not come here without having guarded himself against exposure," Nick replied. "If we had detained him, or insisted upon going with him to make an investigation, we should probably have found that he came in a taxicab from the Athens. What further precautions he may have taken is open to conjecture. Ring up the hotel and see if he is registered there."

Chick hastened to do so, and the information elicited was about what Nick expected. The clerk stated, in response to Chick's inquiries, that Mr. Duchane was a guest at the hotel, that he had been there about a week, and that he was temporarily in New York as the agent of a Western brewery.

"Don't be too inquisitive," cautioned Nick; "lest the clerk informs Duchane, and he infers that we already are on his track. That would put him on his guard and be to our disadvantage, in case the affair becomes serious."

"You're right."

"We'll look him up to-morrow and see what we can learn about him."

Chick hung up the receiver while Nick was speaking. At the same moment the quick, familiar steps of one of the detective's younger assistants, Patsy Garvan, sounded in the hall.

He entered hurriedly, with cheeks flushed by the wintry air outside, and Nick saw at once that he was the bearer of startling information.

"Well, out with it," he said. "What's on your mind?"

"You're quick to see that there's something," laughed Patsy. "But you'd never guess what."

"Nor even try," Nick replied. "What is it?"

"There's a life convict out of Sing Sing."

"Escaped?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"That thoroughbred rascal we canned two months ago—Manuel Vasca."

"Get out!" Chick exclaimed incredulously.

"Get out is right," Patsy tersely insisted. "That's just what he did. I got it straight from the chief at police headquarters."

"When did he escape?"

"Eight days ago."

"Eight days! Why haven't we heard of it?"

"The chief wasn't made wise until this morning," Patsy explained. "I happened in there just after he was phoned by the prison warden."

"Did you learn how the rascal escaped?"

"Not definitely. As near as the chief could make out, the warden's wife was taken sick about two weeks ago and was thought to be dying. She had symptoms

that puzzled the prison doctors, all right, and they had given her up. It seems that Vasca got next to the warden in some way, stating that he was a physician and had seen similar cases, also that he was sure he could cure the woman, if provided with certain drugs and allowed to treat her personally."

"By Jove, that's in a line with some of Vasca's crafty schemes."

"The warden fell for it, all right, thinking it a last resort," Patsy proceeded. "He sent for the drugs Vasca required, and then let him take charge of the patient. She soon began to improve, and Vasca was given an adjoining chamber, always under the eye of a deputy, in order that he might properly handle the case."

"He insisted that that would be necessary, I suppose."

"Most likely. At any rate, he made good in more ways than one."

"How so?"

"During the fourth night he was on the case, he drugged the deputy, the nurse, and one of the house servants, and succeeded in making his escape. The woman has since recovered and——"

"And without a doubt," Nick now interrupted; "her illness was caused by something given to her by confederates of Vasca, at work on the outside. He's a past master of that kind of trickery."

"Well, that's how it was done, as near as I could learn," added Patsy. "The warden has been keeping it quiet, hoping his own officers would be able to track the rascal, and that the truth would not leak out. He reported it to-night, however, and——"

"And if he had done so earlier," Nick again put in, somewhat impatiently; "I should now have Manuel Vasca in irons."

"You would?" questioned Patsy, surprised.

"Yes. Put on your coat and hat, Chick, and come with me. I know now why Duchane struck me as one I had seen before."

"Great Scott! You suspect that he is Vasca."

"More than suspect—I now am sure of it," Nick roundly asserted. "I recall his eyes, his mirthless laugh, his sinister assurance. All that saved him from recognition, despite his very artistic disguise, was the fact that I supposed him to be in prison."

"Naturally, you wouldn't have thought of Vasca."

"Certainly not."

"By Jove, it's barely possible that we can find him."

"Quite likely, providing he still thinks his escape has not been reported," Nick replied. "Knowing it had, he would not have ventured here to-night; you can bet on that."

"He may, indeed, then, be found at the Athens, as he asserted, if he still thinks he can safely pose as Duchane."

"We'll take that chance."

"Going there?"

"Yes, at once. With this disclosure of his identity, the scheme mentioned by the rascal demands more serious consideration. The threats of an obscure Duchane might be safely ignored, perhaps; but not those of a knave as notorious as Manuel Vasca. That arch rascal has not only the genius to plan such a crime, but also the ability and nerve to commit it. We'll lose no time in getting after him."

Both detectives had been making hurried preparations to depart, which they did after giving Patsy a mere hint at what had occurred. They entered the famous hotel about ten minutes later, both in disguise, though Nick made himself known to the clerk, whom he hastened to question, and who stated that Mr. Duchane had come in about five minutes before and gone up to his apartments.

"We'll go up, also," Nick said shortly. "No card; only a boy to show us the way."

It happened that the door of Duchane's suite, which was on the seventh floor, was nearly opposite the elevator, the man in charge of which readily corroborated the statements made by the clerk. He had, he said, brought Duchane up on his previous trip, and had seen him enter his suite.

Nick approached the door and knocked sharply on one of the panels.

"By Jove, this looks fairly promising," whispered Chick, at his elbow. "I think the rascal must be here. You do the talking. I'll have a gun ready, in case he shows fight."

The door was quickly opened. A plump little man of fifty appeared on the threshold. His face was round, rosy, and beaming with smiles. Honesty, geniality and good fellowship stuck out all over him. A man less like Duchane, or Manuel Vasca, scarce could be imagined.

"I wish to see Mr. Duchane," said Nick.

The plump little man laughed unctuously.

"Well, stranger, you won't have to strain your eyes," he jested pleasantly. "Walk right in and make yourself at home. I am Mr. Duchane."

"Leopold Duchane?"

"Yes. Of Milwaukee."

"Is that so?" said Nick, glancing around the room he had entered. "You're alone, eh?"

"I was before you two came in. What's wrong—anything?"

"I expected to meet a tall, somewhat imposing man, with sharp eyes, a full brown beard, and——"

"Oh, I say!" Duchane exclaimed, laughing. "You've made a mistake, or been misinformed. I'm not the man you want. You must be looking for Whiskers."

"Whiskers?" echoed Nick, while Chick began to grin. "Who the deuce is Whiskers?"

"Blessed if I know," Duchane vouchsafed, with a shrug and chuckle.

"Don't know?"

"He gave me no card in return for mine, you see, nor even mentioned his name. So I dubbed him Whiskers, which appeared very appropriate and evoked no objection. In fact, I think the name rather pleased him. I had to call him by some name, you know, while we were knocking out a few games with the ivories and had an occasional drink. I met him only by chance in the billiard room last evening. Some one told you he was Duchane, I take it."

Nick was a keen physiognomist. He saw plainly that the plump little man was telling the truth. His frank, florid face was very convincing. It now was obvious, too, how Manuel Vasca had obtained Duchane's card, and with what object.

"Whiskers, then, as you call him, was a total stranger to you?" Nick said inquiringly.

"Yes, indeed."

"He picked you up in the billiard room?"

"Well, I'm not quite positive who did the picking," laughed Duchane. "We met there, at all events, and enjoyed several games of billiards. That's all there was to it, and all I know about him. He appeared to be all right."

"On the contrary, Mr. Duchane, he is all wrong."

"A crook?"

"Yes."

"Dear me, is that so?" said Duchane, more gravely. "I infer, then, that you are officers and expected to find him here."

"Precisely."

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you. I cannot conceive how you made such a mistake. I can, however, very easily prove that I am on the square and know nothing about your crook. You may search my rooms, if you have any misgivings, or detain me until convinced that I am perfectly honest."

"I already am convinced of that, Mr. Duchane, and know precisely how the mistake occurred. If I do not remain to explain, attribute it to my haste to look elsewhere. You'll pardon us, I'm sure."

"Yes, yes, certainly."

Nick glanced at Chick and led the way from the room.

"We're up against it, evidently," Chick remarked, when they reached the street.

"Up against him, you mean," corrected Nick.

"Manuel Vasca again?"

"I am now sure of it. Having obtained Duchane's card, the nervy rascal ventured to call on me, relying upon his disguise and my supposition that he was in prison. He reasoned that the most I would do, even after hearing him outline his knavish project, would be to ring up the hotel and ask about him. He knew the clerk would speak only favorably of Duchane."

"Certainly."

"The visit was characteristic of Vasca. He's sore because we have twice turned him down, or foiled his evil schemes, and was itching to get back at us in some way. He called to show his defiance, knowing I soon would discover the truth. I'll take that out of him sooner or later."

"Do you think he will undertake the scheme he mentioned?"

"He is capable of it."

"Will you try to prevent it?"

"No," Nick said decidedly. "There's nothing in that. I might only plunge over the traces."

"Why so?"

"Because of many contingencies," Nick explained. "Vasca may have been bluffing, or threatened to commit that crime only to divert us from one he really intends to commit. I cannot consistently, therefore, set about warning the money kings of Wall Street to guard themselves against abduction. Morton, Deland, Brightman, Chadwick, or any of the big men of the recent bull market, would laugh at me for taking any stock in such an audacious project. They would have it on me, for fair, too, if Vasca were to drop the scheme because of my attempt to block it. No one would believe he ever seriously entertained such a project."

"That's very true," Chick thoughtfully admitted.

"Furthermore, under those conditions, I'm not going to publish the fact that Vasca called on me and escaped detection. I have my prestige to look after, despite the extenuating circumstances. May I be hanged, if I stick any feathers in his rascally cap.

No, no, Chick, we'll not climb any mountains before we reach them."

"You've sized it up about right, Nick. It's a safe gamble, however, that the rascal will set to work in some way."

"No doubt of it."

"The devil in him will not long lie idle."

"But the devil always leaves a gapway open, Chick, through which he may be caught," Nick forcibly asserted. "Let Vasca set to work, then, along whatever lines he fancies. I'll find the gapway, all right, take my word for it."

CHAPTER III.

THE MAGNATE'S APPEAL.

Nick Carter was right. It looked like a plunge over the traces, to take his visitor seriously and to rush out with warnings to men infinitely superior to the knave by which they were threatened. It seemed utterly improbable that any sane man would undertake to commit such a felony as had been described.

Nevertheless, Nick Carter fully realized that his visitor, of whose identity he had not the slightest doubt, had told some truth. The acutely sensitive position of a much inflated stock market can hardly be estimated. Only after a crash, the collapse that frequently follows a long upward swing of prices, is it fully appreciated.

That the scheme of Manuel Vasca was something more than an idle dream, however, or the fantastic project of a madman, became apparent much sooner than one would have expected. Only two days had passed, when Nick Carter received convincing evidence that the rascal had begun to get in his work.

It consisted of disclosures made by the prominent New York banker, George Henry Morton, whom Nick had twice served in great emergencies. He was then a dominant power in Wall Street, the president of the North National Bank, the chief director of two of the largest American railways, the promotor of many industrial combines and syndicates, and a financier whose every word and move were influential factors in shaping the conduct of millions of investors and speculators. Such a man is public property, so to speak, and none is watched more closely and persistently.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning, and Nick happened to be alone in his business office when the banker arrived and sent in his card.

Nick received him at once, noting that Morton looked pale and anxious. His portly figure had fallen away somewhat, and there were lines of care and worry in his refined, aristocratic face.

"What's the trouble?" Nick inquired, placing a chair for him near his own. "Something wrong in Wall Street?"

"I fear so. You are quick to suspect it," said Morton, little dreaming why.

"You call, or send for me, only when in trouble," Nick explained, smiling.

"I have a reason for calling this morning, instead of sending for you," Morton gravely answered. "I don't want it generally known that I have any occasion to employ you at this time, which would be the natural inference if you were seen to enter the bank, or my business office. Advantage might be taken of it to make a drive at the market."

"Would that hurt?"

"Possibly. How badly it would hurt, Nick, would depend upon more factors than I have time to enumerate."

"What is the chief trouble?"

"We are in a precarious position, several of us," Morton proceeded to explain. "We have a top-heavy market on our hands."

"How does that happen?"

"In anticipation of a big railway and oceanic transportation combine, the details of which are known only to a few insiders, we have been accumulating stocks all the way up to their present level. We have millions of shares, and then some; and our securities must be held at present prices, or very near them, until the deal mentioned can be completed and the facts published. Otherwise, we are bound to be badly hurt."

"I see," said Nick. "Who are with you on the inside?"

"This is confidential."

"Certainly."

"Our pool consists of only six capitalists, including myself, with all but one of whom you are acquainted."

"Namely?"

"Claude Deland, president of the Western Railway; Delancey Brightman, head of the Lake Transportation Company; Chadwick, of the steel combine; Isaac Vantoon, the banker; and James Hammond, who is here from London as the secret representative of an English syndicate."

"Well, well, that makes a powerful pool, for fair."

"Each still has a few millions back of him, Nick,

but our volume of investments to date would stagger you."

"No doubt," Nick admitted, knowing the vast resources of the men mentioned, all of whom had a national reputation. "Tell me, Morton, why you fear a serious turn of the market."

"That is always to be feared after a prolonged bull movement. Several weeks must elapse before we can consistently disclose the deal mentioned, which entirely warrants the seemingly high prices. We are opposed by a tremendous, aggressive short interest, however, alert to take advantage of the slightest adverse condition. The market never was more sensitive than at just this time. Any unfavorable event would cause a bad break, one that might possibly result in a panic. You know what that would mean to us at such a time."

"I can imagine," said Nick.

"I have not called to picture the entire situation, however," Morton quickly added. "I know you already appreciate it. My business relates to another matter."

"What matter, Mr. Morton?"

"The mysterious disappearance of two of the men I have mentioned."

"Which two?" asked Nick, without a change of countenance.

"Chadwick and Deland."

"When did you last see them?"

"Yesterday afternoon about five o'clock."

"That's not long ago."

"True, yet their absence is not less mysterious."

"Explain."

"We have been working secretly, of course, to carry out our plans and to prevent any serious break in the market. It was given a temporary shaking yesterday by the President's message to Congress, and after the closing we had an important conference in my office."

"The six men comprising your pool?"

"Yes. Failing to complete our business, the meeting was adjourned until nine o'clock this morning. It is imperative that all shall be present at such meetings, but Deland and Chadwick did not show up, nor can they be found. So far as I can learn, neither has been seen since they left my office at five o'clock yesterday."

"Did they leave together?"

"Yes."

"Any one with them?"

"No."

"Did either mention another engagement, by which he may have been detained this morning?"

"Nothing of the kind. Furthermore, no engagement could be so terribly important as our conference this morning. Neither would have ignored it. Both are thoroughly reliable."

"Do they reside in the city?"

"Yes. Chadwick lives with his wife and daughter at the Athens. Deland owns a house on Riverside Drive. Neither was at home last night, nor sent any word in explanation of his absence."

"You have communicated with their wives?"

"Yes. We have, in fact, kept the telephone wires hot with inquiries in every direction, but can find no trace of either man. In a nutshell, Nick, they seem to have vanished immediately after leaving my office."

"Do you know of any person having designs upon them?"

"I do not."

"Or of any gang, or clique, who would engage in a conspiracy against you and your pool?"

"Conspiracy—no, certainly not," Mr. Morton quickly declared. "As a matter of fact, none knows of our pool. We are bound to secrecy. At the most, our plans can only be conjectured."

"I see."

"There are thousands of speculators, of course, who would be glad to thwart us for pecuniary gain, but I know of none who would conspire feloniously to do so. No, no, there is nothing in that, Nick, I'm very sure."

"Nevertheless," said the detective; "you are wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Both Deland and Chadwick have been abducted."

"Abducted?" Mr. Morton exclaimed. "Do you really think so?"

"I haven't a doubt of it."

"Abducted by whom and with what object? Why do you think so?"

"I will tell you why, Mr. Morton."

Nick then proceeded to do so, informing him of Manuel Vasca's recent visit and the scheme he had mentioned, as well as of the vain attempt made to arrest the rascal. The banker listened without interrupting, though his grave face had become more pale and apprehensive.

"Good heavens!" he said, when Nick had finished. "Am I again to be made a mark by that scoundrel? I'm surprised, astounded, that any sane man could even conceive such a project. It's utterly——"

"There is no going back of the returns," Nick interrupted. "The mysterious disappearance of your two associates is very significant. Vasca's scheme, audacious though it appears, is quite in a line with his daring operations both here and abroad. He is capable of any degree of knavery."

"And you really think that both men have been abducted?"

"I certainly do. Both are millionaires, aren't they?"

"Yes, ten times over."

"Take my word for it, Morton," said Nick; "Vasca has begun to make good. He has contrived to get away with both men. That is the only reasonable explanation of their sudden strange disappearance."

"You may be right."

"Nor will he stop with them, if he carries out his entire scheme," Nick added. "He will plot to abduct others. It is quite possible that you, being one of the most prominent operators now in the market, will be his next victim."

"Not by a long chalk," frowned the banker. "I will prevent that, Nick, if I have to employ a company of militia. Better still, however, I will employ you."

"I think that will be the wiser," smiled Nick.

"Understand me," Morton gravely added; "I am not disposed to underrate the ability of this man Vasca, nor to make light of his designs. The situation already is much too serious to be lightly considered, assuming that you are right in your suspicions."

"I am very sure of that."

"Deland and Chadwick must be found, then, and rescued with the least possible delay. Steps must be taken to prevent another such outrage. If it were known that such a conspiracy exists, that two of my closest associates are already in the hands of a gang of abductors, the effect upon the market would be all that Vasca predicts. With all our millions, we might not be able to support it. I can hardly realize that matters have taken such a turn. We are confronted with disaster, with ruin, perhaps, unless something can be done to prevent it. Something must be done, in fact, and done quickly."

Mr. Morton was not a man to be easily disturbed. He was accustomed to discuss matters of vast importance, or coolly meet emergencies that would stagger most men. Nevertheless, as the gravity of the existing situation dawned upon him, he had become agitated, white with dismay, and was trembling visibly.

"Be composed, Mr. Morton, and don't lose your head," Nick gravely advised. "The situation is, I'll admit, just as bad as you picture it. It can be rectified only by wise and energetic action."

"But what's to be done?" Mr. Morton pleaded. "I see no way, nor know where to turn. If the truth leaks out, we shall be swamped before we can——"

"Stop a moment," Nick interposed. "As you say, something must be done quickly. But you, Mr. Morton, are not the man to do it. You have neither the nerve nor the experience. The question is—are you willing to leave the work to me and follow my instructions?"

"Yes, I am."

"Follow them to the letter?"

"Absolutely."

"Very well. I will undertake, then, to foil Manuel Vasca and set you right," said Nick, with convincing earnestness. "My success may depend, however, upon your doing precisely what I direct."

"I certainly will. What are your instructions?"

"To begin with," said Nick; "the truth must be suppressed. Under no circumstances must it be allowed to leak out. Vasca will not reveal it, that's a sure thing, and you must seal the lips of your several associates in the pool."

"I will do so. But how is the absence of Chadwick and Deland to be explained?"

"Easily. Circulate a report that both are away on business which will detain them indefinitely. That will give me time to get in my work."

"I understand."

"You must make sure, also, that the members of their families corroborate the story. I leave that minor detail to you."

"I will attend to it promptly."

"This explanation of their absence will serve for a time, at least, to avert a serious drive at the market."

"Possibly."

"Should one be made, however, you and your associates must be prepared to meet it. You must support the market, Mr. Morton, if it requires the united millions of all who are identified with you in the deal mentioned."

"It shall be done, if possible."

"There must be no ifs," Nick forcibly insisted. "You already have pictured the necessity of pegging the market at its present level. If you allow it to drop, if you yield to the bears, the big short interest that is out to depress prices, there will be a break that may, as you said, result in a panic sufficiently severe to wreck you and your pool. You've got to

hold this market, Morton, until I can sift this knavery to the bottom."

"It shall be done," said the banker simply, though he knew that his pledge might involve millions.

"Even if other members of your pool are abducted?"

"Do you apprehend that?"

"I know only what Manuel Vasca threatened—and already has done."

"But cannot steps be taken to prevent——"

"I will look after the preventative measures," Nick interrupted. "That is part of my work. It is yours I want to be sure of."

"I repeat, then, that your instructions shall be rigidly followed."

"And the market firmly supported?"

"Yes, though it takes our last million."

"And even if you yourself, Morton, were to be trapped and put out of sight?"

"I will plan even for that. Let come what may, Nick, the market shall be firmly held," the banker again assured him. "You should know what that pledge means, coming from me."

"I do, indeed."

"As for my being out of sight," Morton quickly added; "I venture to say that nothing of that kind will occur. I will guard against it constantly."

"To make doubly sure, Mr. Morton, I shall provide you with a guardian."

"A guardian?"

"Yes. When you leave this house, you will be followed by one of my shrewdest assistants."

"Ah, I see."

"He will shadow you constantly, relieved at intervals by others. His object will be to protect you; or, failing in that, to get on the track of the knaves engaged in this conspiracy. For I am very sure, Morton, that Manuel Vasca is not the only accomplished scoundrel in this plot."

"Your plan is a good one," Morton said approvingly. "I shall feel easier, knowing that I am under the watchful eye of an officer."

"I do not want it suspected, however," Nick cautioned him. "You must be very careful, therefore, to conduct yourself precisely as if you knew nothing about it."

"I will do so."

"Very good."

"Is there anything more?"

"Not at present. I will detain you only while I give a few instructions to my assistant. He will be ready in a very few minutes."

Nick turned to his desk and rang for Patsy Garvan.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN WHO VANISHED.

It was precisely noon when Mr. Morton left Nick Carter's residence and returned to his place of business in Broad Street.

Patsy Garvan picked him up on the first corner south, having left the house five minutes before, after receiving Nick's instructions.

Alone in his business office, Nick hastened to call his chief assistant, whom he quickly informed of Morton's disclosures and the directions he had given him.

"I did not tell him all I suspect, nor why I insisted upon his supporting the market," he said pointedly, in conclusion.

"Got something up your sleeve, eh?" Chick questioned.

"As a matter of fact, Chick, the situation is even worse than he imagined, worse than I was willing to disclose."

"You feared to increase his alarm?"

"I feared, rather, that he would lose his head and shrink from following my instructions. Men of his financial caliber, even, or pools as powerful as that with which he now is identified, sometimes lose their nerve and go entirely to pieces under a terrific market crash, such a one as I believe to be imminent. I literally had to inspire him with confidence that we can win out the game that is being played."

"Vasca's game?"

"We are up against bigger men than Manuel Vasca ever dreamed of being; though not worse men, perhaps, if viewed from a criminal standpoint.

"Bigger men, Nick?"

"Yes, and a bigger game than we often tackle."

"What do you mean?"

"I've gone back to first principles."

"Explain."

"You remember what I said after Vasca called on me and outlined his scheme to abduct several millionaires and extort a big ransom from each. I said that he had not stated precisely what he had in view, that his abduction syndicate, as he termed it, was only a blind for hiding some other kind of knavery, and

that the object of his visit was to draw suspicion upon himself, and by doing so divert it from others."

"And the others are the bigger men you mentioned?"

"Exactly."

"Whom do you suspect?"

"Some of the heavy speculators who are badly short of stocks, who have reached their limit and no longer can make good."

"Oh, ho! I see the point," Chick exclaimed. "You don't think, then, that Vasca is back of the scheme."

"On the contrary, that is precisely what I think," Nick replied. "I believe him to have been the originator and instigator of it."

"How so?"

"Having escaped from Sing Sing and observed the present market conditions, I think he contrived to get in touch with some of the operators on the short side of the market, and that he framed up and offered to execute, not precisely the scheme he outlined to us, but one that would enable them to shake the very stuffing out of the market and not only retrieve their losses, but also win out millions in the panic they hope to create."

"And you think the shorts fell for it?"

"I do."

"And employed Vasca to do the job?"

"Yes, at his solicitation."

"By Jove, that would be rascally business for decent men."

"Decent men, Chick, when caught in a corner, often become desperate men."

"That's very true."

"When lives and fortunes are at stake, men will take long chances; particularly when there is any such probability of escaping exposure as Vasca may have pointed out."

"By doing the most hazardous part of the work himself?"

"Exactly."

"That might have been an inducement," Chick admitted.

"I'm very sure that my theory is correct," Nick confidently insisted. "At all events, Chick, we'll proceed to act upon it, and must get in our work in double-quick time."

"I'm with you."

"There's bound to be a battle royal in Wall Street, and if Vasca gets in his work ahead of us, it may be that Morton's crowd will be swamped before we can call the turn on his opponents."

"What are your plans?"

"We've got to find out, to begin with, who are the big shorts in the market."

"Why did you insist that Morton must support it?"

"Partly for his own sake and to avert, if possible, a panic. Chiefly, however, in order that I may see what big bear operators take advantage of the disappearance of Chadwick and Deland, or of anything else that may follow, to make persistent and violent attacks upon the market."

"Indicating that they are the men we must get after."

"Exactly."

"That's not so bad."

"We must not depend upon that alone, however, nor can we delay to wait for it," Nick forcibly added, rising.

"What's your scheme?"

"We'll go down among the brokers in disguise, and see what we can quietly pick up. We may learn something that will serve as a clue."

"Very likely. "I'm with you, at all events."

"To expedite matters," Nick added; "I will visit some of the offices in Wall Street, while you tackle those in Broad Street. We still have a couple of hours before the market will close."

It was one o'clock when the two detectives, both in disguise, parted at the corner of Wall and Broad Streets. Nick fully realized that he had, assuming that his suspicions were correct, undertaken a tremendous task. He had, in effect, taken the market situation upon his own shoulders. He had pledged himself to meet an emergency that was staggering bankers and magnates. He had dictated the course they must take, involving the expenditure, and possibly the sacrifice, of untold millions.

Nick had done this, too, in spite of the fact that he possibly had to cope, indirectly, with men nearly as powerful as those he was seeking to serve. He fully realized that failure on his part would spell disaster, possibly ruin, the result of a panic that might prove to be a national calamity.

Leaving Chick to follow the instructions given him, Nick entered the Stock Exchange building and made his way to one of the galleries. The scene on the floor was one to have chilled the blood of any other man carrying such a burden as he had assumed. The tumult was deafening, the excitement indescribable. Brokers were fighting like madmen around the standards of the leading stocks, particularly those involved

in the recent heavy operations of the Morton pool, and prices were fluctuating like a ribbon in a gale.

Nick saw at a glance, however, that there had been no severe break, that a determined support already was manifest, and for several minutes he watched the frantic crowd as composedly as if he had no vital interest at stake.

In the meantime, Chick Carter was walking briskly through Broad Street, and, approaching a huge stone building in which Morton rented a suite of offices, having extensive business interests besides those devolving upon him as a bank president. Less than an hour had passed since his appeal to Nick Carter, less than three days had elapsed since the visit of Manuel Vasca, yet Nick had sized up the circumstances so shrewdly, and set to work so quickly on the case, that there began then and there a series of incidents utterly beyond Vasca's anticipations, so sensational and stirring that the strained market conditions paled to insignificance.

As Chick was approaching the door of the building mentioned, a rapidly driven taxicab swerved to the curbing, and the chauffeur sprang down to open the door for a woman to alight—a very handsome, richly clad young woman, wearing superb furs, a fashionable hat and partly drawn veil.

"The banker's daughter, Claudia Morton," thought Chick, glancing furtively at her when she hurried into the building. "By Jove, she looks more attractive than when Vasca had her down and out with his infernal drugs. No sign of the Blue Death in those pink cheeks, for fair. She must have come here to see her father."

Chick followed her into the building. He then saw that she was in haste and appeared nervous. She rang twice for the elevator, though it was descending, and awaited it with impatient upward glances at the indicator.

"Why didn't she walk up?" Chick asked himself, pausing at the base of the broad stairway to watch her. "Morton's quarters are on the second floor. She could have walked in half the time she's been waiting. By Jove, she may be going higher. I reckon I'll find out."

Claudia Morton then was waiting for the departing passengers to leave the elevator. Instead of taking it with her, Chick hurried up the stairs and turned to the corridor into which the lift opened, and which also adjoined the banker's suite of offices.

At the same moment, a thin-featured fellow, clad like a messenger, also hurried up the stairs and through the same corridor, casting a quick furtive glance at the detective while passing him.

Neither observed a third person who was partly hidden by a corner of the balustrade a few yards away, a position commanding a view of the stairs and the street door. He joined Chick almost immediately, however, exclaiming quietly:

"Say! what was you looking at down below?"

"Hello!" Chick muttered, turning quickly. "So you're here, Patsy."

"Yes, keeping an eye on Morton. What were you looking at?" Patsy repeated.

"Morton's daughter, Claudia. There she is now, leaving the elevator. She's going into her father's office. Why do you ask?"

"Because that fellow who just passed her was watching you mighty sharp while you were watching her. I happened to be looking over the balustrade and saw both of you."

"Watching me, eh?"

"Yes, all the while you stood at the foot of the stairs."

"The chap wearing a messenger's uniform?"

"Yes."

"I wonder what it signifies? He cannot have known me in this disguise."

"He may have suspected something, seeing you watching Morton's daughter."

"Possibly."

"He's going into the brokers' office next to Morton's. Dudley, Deacon, and Scott is the firm. There's always a big crowd of speculators in their place."

"Is Morton in his office?"

"Yes. He hiked down here right after talking with Nick."

"Wait for me," Chick said abruptly. "I'll step into that other office and see what I can make of the messenger. I didn't notice him."

"Go ahead. I'll see you when you come out, unless Morton gets a move on."

Their interview had been brief. Hardly a minute had passed since Claudia Morton entered the banker's office, and the messenger that of the brokerage firm. As he walked through the corridor, Chick quickly changed his disguise for one he had in his pocket, and then sauntered into the office of Dudley, Deacon & Scott. He knew the firm very well by reputation, and that its commission business was one of the largest in the city.

There were several persons in the main office, engaged with clerks at the windows of the latticed in-

closure containing the desks and vaults. In two large adjoining rooms, in which the stock boards were displayed, was a throng of speculators, young and old, watching the trend of prices. The air was hazy with cigar smoke. The sound of subdued voices constantly filled the room. The clicking of the tickers was incessant. The scene, as well as the intent, absorbed faces of the crowd, was suggestive of the strained nervous tension then prevailing, not only in the stock market, but in quarters less open to inspection.

Chick's entrance attracted no attention. He sauntered into the rear of the two rooms, where he almost immediately discovered the man he was seeking.

He was a thin, slender fellow of thirty, with a pinched face and an expression which Chick, though he did not know him, by no means fancied. His eyes were as restless as those of a rat in a strange cellar. He wormed his way to the door a few moments after the detective entered, and presently sidled out and entered a smaller back room, the door of which was only partly open.

Chick had been furtively watching him, and noted not only his caution, but also where he went. Of the latter he felt absolutely sure, and he slipped out and after him at once.

"I'll fake an occasion to question him," he said to himself. "I'll contrive to find out who he is."

Upon entering the same back room, however, Chick met with a surprise.

Two bare walls, a third entirely flanked with a blackboard showing foreign market quotations, a fourth with a window overlooking a narrow court, several chairs, and a table in one corner—only these met Chick's startled gaze.

The window was closed and locked. There was no visible door, except that through which the fellow had entered scarce five seconds before, and by which Chick knew he could not possibly have departed.

Nevertheless, the man had vanished.

CHAPTER V.

CHICK DOWN AND OUT.

Chick Carter was puzzled.

Where had the suspect gone so quickly? Not out of the window, for that was closed and locked. Not through the floor, for that was intact, as well as the ceiling; and the same was true of the two plastered walls.

Having no belief in black magic, Chick naturally turned in the only other direction for an explanation of the man's lightninglike disappearance—to the blackboard that completely covered the one remaining wall.

Its entire surface was lined off with small rectangles, marked with white paint, since become gray and defaced. Nearly all of the spaces contained figures, written with white chalk, and Chick quickly saw that they were foreign market quotations, in which the customers of the firm had only an indifferent interest, and it was equally obvious that the room was seldom occupied.

Chick also saw something more significant—that the figures in one of the rectangles were partly rubbed out, leaving a smooch of chalk and the mark of a man's hand. Hastening to inspect it more closely, he made a second discovery—that there was a crack in the blackboard, running parallel with one of the painted vertical lines, which made it almost imperceptible.

At once suspicious, Chick pressed his hand on the partly obliterated figures and found that a portion of the blackboard yielded slightly, and that he then could insert the tips of his fingers into the crack.

"By Jove, here's a secret door," he said to himself. "This clears the mystery. This was the way the fellow went."

Drawing the movable section of the board outward, Chick had found that it swung on hinges, a door so artfully constructed that it scarce could be seen, when closed,

Back of it was a second door, with some six inches of space between the two, the thickness of the wall and woodwork. It was an oak door, tightly closed, and Chick rightly inferred that it opened into an adjoining room.

Crouching quickly, he peered through the keyhole.

He detected the glow of an electric light, and the voices of men could be faintly heard. Pressing still nearer, he could see the opposite wall of the room, also one arm and shoulder of the man in a messenger's uniform, and could distinguish what was said.

"Nan will turn the trick, all right, take my word for it," the fellow was saying.

"When did you leave her?"

The voice of the questioner was cold, sinister and as hard as nails.

"An hour ago, after she had strung the girl as you directed. She sent me to inform you she had

fixed things, and to see whether the girl is making good."

"You think she is?"

"Sure thing! She's with her dad this minute."

"By Jove, the girl they're talking of is Claudia Morton," thought Chick. "Been stringing her, eh? There's a job on, then, of some kind, to which I'd better get wise."

"I saw her go into his office five minutes ago," the fellow quickly added. "What's not so fat for us, though, barring I'm wrong, I wasn't the only one who saw her."

"What do you mean?" came the question, as quick as a flash.

"There was another man who watched her enter the building and come up to her dad's office."

"Another man? Anybody you know?"

"Not from a side of leather."

"How do you know he was watching her, Murdock?"

"I had my lamps on him all the while. He kept his eye on her till she took the elevator, and then he bolted upstairs to see whether she left it on this floor. I was wise, all right—what's wrong? Is it as bad as that?"

The other man had vented a snarl, a half-smothered oath, and had sprung to his feet. Chick heard him fling back a chair, heard him stride fiercely to and fro for a few moments, and then caught a momentary glimpse of him as he came within visual range through the keyhole.

"Holy smoke!" leaped up in Chick's mind. "Manuel Vasca!"

There was no mistaking him, even with only a momentary glance. His sinister, swarthy face, his beetling brows, his piercing black eyes, his bulldog jaw, and thin, cruel mouth, his compact, muscular figure, then bowed with a threatening crouch, as the mingled fear and fury of quickened suspicion seized upon him—no, there was no mistaking him by one who had seen Manuel Vasca undisguised and at his worst, as the Carters had seen him.

"It's bad enough," he snarled, with suppressed ferocity, in reply to Murdock's terse question. "Why should any man have been watching her? What man can have had an interest in her at this time—barring one! Stay—describe him! What type of man?"

"Oh, he's not such a much, as far as looks go," replied Murdock. "An erect, stocky fellow, medium complexion, with a brown mustache and goatee."

"Goatee—bah!" growled Vasca. "Who wears a goatee in these days? Only one man in a million. It's a million to one, then, that it wasn't his—that he was in disguise."

"That's right, you crafty rascal, and it's now in my pocket," thought Chick.

"Disguise!" Murdock echoed, staring. "You don't think——"

"I do think," snapped Vasca, interrupting. "I think he was all you imagine, and then some! I think he was a detective, possibly one of the Carters. Who else would have been watching her? Whom else have we to fear? He may have been watching you, as well as the girl, and may have followed you."

"Followed me—great guns!" Murdock exclaimed. "In that case——"

"Silence!" Vasca sharply commanded, darting to a desk at which he had been seated. "Take my instructions. We must make sure. Put on this disguise and slip out by the way you entered. See whether he is in Dudley's place, or still watching in the corridor. If he——"

"Great Scott! it's a getaway for mine," thought Chick, without waiting to hear more.

In view of what he had discovered and already had heard, denoting designs upon the Mortons, he saw that his immediate departure was imperative. He drew back through the blackboard door and was about to rise and close it, when the quick click of a lock on his ears, instantly followed by a sharp, threatening command.

"Hands up, young man, and keep quiet! What are you doing there?"

Chick started up and wheeled round. The door by which he had entered the room had been closed and locked. Barring his way to it, stood a tall, red-featured, powerful man of fifty, frowning darkly, and with a revolver leveled at the detective's head.

"Hands up and answer me," he sternly added. "What are you doing there?"

Keenly appreciating the sudden serious turn of affairs and the need of haste, Chick seized the bull by the horns and attempted to square himself.

"Hold on, sir; don't shoot," he pleaded, pretending to be greatly alarmed. "Point that gun t'other way. I'm not a crook, nor doing anything wrong."

"Is that so?" sneered the other incredulously.

"Yes, on the dead," Chick protested.

"You keep your hands up, all the same, or you'll need an undertaker. What were you doing at that door?"

"I wasn't at the door, sir. I saw an edge of the blackboard sticking out and thought it had broken away. I was only trying to fix it, when I found that part of it swung on hinges. That's all, sir, on the level. I'll get out at once, sir, and——"

"You'll stay right where you are," said the man with a gun. "Whether you stay alive, or dead, rests with you. I've seen enough of your doings to queer that story. You were listening at the inner door and looking through the keyhole."

"Say! you wouldn't shoot a fellow for that, would you?" Chick asked coolly.

"No. But I'd shoot him for moving after I had ordered him to stand still."

"You'd be heard in the outer office and arrested before you could escape."

"And would state that I thought you a crook, breaking into that room. That would clear me, all right. You move and I'll shoot, take my word for it."

"I'd sooner take the look in your ugly eyes," retorted Chick, seeing plainly that the man meant what he said. Then he impatiently added: "What are you going to do about it, anyway? Going to keep me standing here like a wooden cigar sign. Come outside and settle it."

"We'll settle it inside."

"Inside?"

"I'll satisfy your curiosity concerning that room, and at the same time find out who you are," the man sternly threatened. "Back up! I'm not taking your word for anything. Back up to the door. I'll have it opened, all right."

Chick had no sane alternative. He drew back until his shoulders nearly touched the oak door beyond that in the blackboard.

At the same time, the man with a gun cried sharply:

"Murdy! Lend me a hand here, Murdy."

Murdock opened the door from within almost immediately.

Chick Carter instantly took a desperate chance. Thinking there might be another door in the room, through which he possibly could escape, he threw himself backward against Murdock, quickly seizing him and whirling him around to serve as a shield from the other's bullets, in case he fired, and at the same time reaching for his own revolver.

It was a bold move, characteristic of Chick, and it deserved to have met with more success than befell him. For it proved to be entirely futile, in fact, both Murdock and Vasca having been listening at the door during the brief interview, each with a weapon drawn to meet the obvious emergency.

When Chick bounded backward and grappled with Murdock, Vasca leaped lightly aside, with a look of satanic determination on his swarthy face. Then, as Chick swung round, handling Murdock as if he weighed no more than a feather, Vasca grasped the barrel of his revolver and dealt the detective a single, violent blow on the back of his head.

Only one such blow was needed. Chick's tense muscles relaxed as if suddenly paralyzed. His knees buckled under him and he sank senseless upon the floor, as inert as a bag of sand.

CHAPTER VI.

VASCA'S CRAFTY SCHEME.

Constantly with an eye on the doors of the two offices, Patsy Garvan waited in vain for Chick to rejoin him.

Twenty minutes passed.

The door of the banker's office opened and Morton came out with his daughter.

"Here's where I must get busy," thought Patsy. "And Chick must have found his man, or he'd have showed up by this time. I'll get word from him later, most likely."

Contrary to Patsy's anticipations, Mr. Morton had come out only to escort his daughter to the taxicab, in which she immediately departed. As the banker turned back to go up to his office, he caught sight of Patsy leaning against a lintel post at the base of the stairs.

In order that the work of the young detective might be made less difficult, it had been arranged with Morton to contrive to inform Patsy where he was going, when intending to take a conveyance, and he now walked more slowly when passing him, yet without a second glance, and quickly whispered:

"My daughter will return for me at five. I shall be safe enough with her, and we shall go directly home. Resume your espionage at my residence."

A quiet grunt signified that he was understood, and the banker proceeded upstairs.

"Gee! these millionaire magnates are all right," thought Patsy approvingly. "He's onto his job, for fair, and is trying to make it soft walking for me. There'll be nothing doing till five, so I'll make a bid to find out what Chick is up against."

Taking the elevator, Patsy went up to the second floor and entered the office of Dudley, Deacon & Scott, precisely half an hour after Chick had done so.

There was no great change in the scene, no Chick to be found, no man in a messenger's uniform.

Patsy looked into each room, including that in which Chick had been held up, which again was open and the trick blackboard apparently intact:

"He must have gone out while I was down below," Patsy reasoned. "The lantern-jawed chap, also, must have left, and Chick probably got onto his trail. It's a cinch that neither is here. There's nothing for me, now, but to wait for Morton to get a move on."

In anticipation of it, Patsy sauntered out to the street just before five. Daylight had given way to darkness, and the air of the December evening was a bit sharp.

A taxicab stood at the curbing. The chauffeur, muffled in a great coat, was on the seat.

Patsy needed only a glance through the window of the closed door to feel sure of the identity of the passenger, despite the fact that he could see her only indistinctly. That fine figure, the superb furs, the fashionable hat, the drawn veil—who could mistake them?

Not even the banker himself, evidently, for he hurried out of the building at precisely five o'clock, greeted the woman cheerily as he entered the vehicle, then turned and banged the door—all of which was plainly seen and heard by Patsy, who had lingered to see him safely into the cab.

"He's all right with her, for fair, and he'll reach home safely," he said to himself, as the taxicab moved rapidly up Broad Street. "It has saved me a stern chase, his telling me his daughter would call for him. I'll snatch a bite to eat, then make a bee line for his residence. Later, I'll phone to Nick and get relieved."

Patsy was on his way before his soliloquy ended.

It was half-past six when he arrived opposite the palatial Fifth Avenue residence of the banker, and proceeded to inspect its lighted windows, thinking he might catch sight of Morton in one of the rooms.

Instead, after waiting and watching for about ten minutes, he saw Claudia Morton come to one of the drawing-room windows, at which she parted the delicate lace draperies and looked out upon the brightly lighted avenue.

"Ah, there's the daughter," thought Patsy. "Morton must be there, then, since they returned in company. I've a mind to get him on the phone and see if he's housed for the night. In that case, he ought to be safe enough from any trap that blackguard Vasca can set for him. He'll not trap him easily, now that Nick is out to prevent it, and——"

Patsy felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked quickly round, and was surprised to meet the inquiring eyes of—Nick Carter.

"Gee!" he exclaimed involuntarily. "You here, chief? I reckoned you'd send Bob Ferret to relieve me. I didn't think you'd come."

"Where is Morton, Patsy?" asked Nick, steadily eying his assistant.

"Over yonder," said Patsy, with a toss of his head toward the banker's residence.

"At home?"

"Sure! He came in a taxi with his daughter more'n an hour ago. She called for him at his office, and he told me they were going straight home. I just saw her at one of the windows, so he must be there, of course. Say! what are you looking at me like that for, chief? I haven't gone lame, have I?"

"Somebody has gone lame," said Nick, with some austerity.

"What do you mean, chief?"

"I'm here in response to a telephone from Morton's daughter. He is not at home."

"Not at home?"

"Nor has she seen him since two o'clock."

"Holy smoke!" Patsy gasped, as grave as if he had heard his death sentence. "Who the deuce, then, was the woman he joined in the taxi? She wore a hat, veil, and furs just like Miss Morton's."

"You saw her to-day, then?"

"Sure I did! I saw her at two o'clock when Mr. Morton left her. 'Twas then he said she would call for him at five and that he'd return home with her. Say, chief——"

"I'll hear the rest of your explanation after talking with her," Nick interrupted. "Come with me. It's very evident that the girl has been duped; that you have been blinded, and Morton victimized by the scurvy knave out of whose hands we have tried to keep him."

"By thunder, chief, if I've been as woolly-eyed as that I'll never——"

"There's nothing in crying over spilled milk, Patsy," Nick again interrupted. "If that's the situation, we must meet it squarely. The best of us are fooled at times, so don't take it to heart. Every failure is a lesson, every slip up a spur to better work next time. No more at present."

They had mounted the steps of the banker's residence, and Nick rang the bell while he was speaking. He felt a bit put out by what had occurred, but seeing how badly Patsy felt, and knowing his energy and devotion were never lacking, however he might err, he had no inclination to chide him.

Henderson, the butler, answered the bell and admitted them to the reception hall. They were joined almost immediately by Claudia Morton, who, looking pale and anxious, at once began to excuse herself for having, perhaps, summoned the detective without sufficient cause.

Nick checked her politely, saying earnestly:

"You did perfectly right, Miss Morton. As time may be of value, tell me as briefly as possible the cause of your misgivings."

"To begin with, Mr. Carter, a telephone communication which I received at eleven o'clock this morning——"

"From whom?"

"A woman, who stated that her name was Mrs. Raymond, and that she kept a lodging house in Harlem. She said that she had very important information for my father, but which must be imparted secretly, lest she should get into great trouble. She added that she did not dare to call here, nor at his office, nor would she venture to telephone her information to him. She rang me up, therefore, to ask me to meet her in the shoe department of Wanamaker's department store at precisely noon, that she might confer with me."

"You consented?"

"Yes. Knowing that my father is seriously involved in the stock market just now, and that no harm, even if any was intended, could befall me in so public a place, I decided to meet the woman. I then called up my father's office, intending to tell him and ask his advice, but he was absent."

"That was between eleven and twelve?"

"Yes."

"He then was in my office," said Nick. "Proceed with your story."

"I met the woman, as agreed," Claudia continued. "She is a dark, well-built, prepossessing woman, and was clad in mourning. She stated that she has recently buried her husband and now is compelled to take lodgers."

"Did you ask for her address?"

"I did not."

"What further information did she give you?"

"She said that she had overheard three of her lodgers, strangers who have been in her house only a few days, discussing a conspiracy to abduct my father. Naturally, I was somewhat alarmed, knowing that two of his associates have recently disappeared, and I judged that Mrs. Raymond was telling the truth."

"Quite naturally," Nick admitted.

"I asked her to tell me the details of the plot," Claudia proceeded. "She insisted, however, that she could make it plain only to my father, owing to her uncertainty about some of the matters she had overheard mentioned, and concerning which he would be able to assist her memory. I at once offered, therefore, to take her down to his office."

"What did she say to that?"

"She said that she did not dare go till after dark, that she had reason to believe that she had been detected while listening to the three men, one of whom since had been stealthily watching her. Her looks and actions indicated that she was nervous and apprehensive, and I finally consented to adopt the plan she suggested."

"What was the plan?"

"She said she could spare but little time from her home duties, and must be sure to find my father. She told me to go to his office and arrange to call for him with a taxicab at five o'clock. She insisted that he must not be told of the conspiracy before then, when she could inform him of its details, lest it might so influence his conduct in the meantime, that her disclosures would be suspected and serious harm befall him."

"You believed her, I infer."

"I did, Mr. Carter, and offered to meet her with a taxicab at half-past four, after having made sure that we should find my father in his office."

"That did not suit her, I'll wager," Nick said dryly.

"Not exactly," said Claudia. "Instead, she said she would come from Harlem in a taxicab, and, instead of stopping in front of this house, that she would pick me up just before five on the first corner south, on this side of the avenue. She said we then would call for my father, and she would tell him the whole story while we were returning in the taxicab. She insisted that she would not venture to enter his office, nor to come to this house, both of which she said were being watched by the conspirators, or their agents."

"You inferred, of course, that she stood in fear of them."

"Yes, sir."

"Did she mention their names?"

"No, but said she would inform my father."

"Did you follow her instructions?"

"Yes, to the letter."

"Saying nothing to your father about her, or about the conspiracy?"

"Not a word. I invented a plausible occasion for calling on him at two o'clock, and persuaded him to let me come for him at five. I was on the first corner south at that time, as agreed, and waited until nearly six, thinking that Mrs. Raymond must have been detained. Finally, becoming suspicious, I returned home and telephoned to my father's office. Fortunately, one of the bookkeepers was there, and he informed me that my father had left the office at five to return home with me."

"The plot then dawned upon you, eh?"

"I was greatly alarmed, of course," said Claudia. "I knew of only one thing to do."

"Telephone to me?"

"Yes, sir. I did so at once, sir."

"As I have said, Miss Morton, you did perfectly right," Nick replied. "The rascally scheme is obvious. The woman was in the employ of Manuel Vasca. Her story and name were fictitious, and it would be useless to seek her in Harlem."

"But——"

"Let me explain. She blinded you with that story, only to dupe you into misleading your father, that he might become an easy victim to the rascals. They reasoned that he would readily consent to your proposition, and have no misgivings on entering a taxicab in which he supposed you were waiting."

"Of course not."

"The waiting woman, however, probably was your Mrs. Raymond, clad in furs, hat, and veil resembling yours."

"Dear me! Now I see what you're driving at."

"In the semidarkness," Nick added; "your father would not immediately have detected the fraud, nor have been at all surprised if he had found a man in company with you, or the woman supposed to be you."

"No, Mr. Carter, certainly not."

"That I am convinced is precisely what he found," said Nick. "Before he discovered the true situation, moreover, he was held up in the cab and his life threatened, unless he kept quiet and yielded to his captors. He had, in fact, no other sane course. That's all there was to it, Miss Morton. Your father has been abducted and now is in the hands of the Vasca gang."

"And all owing to my blindness and——" began Claudia, with a sob of remorse.

Nick checked her kindly and hastened to reassure her.

"Not entirely, Miss Morton, and you must not feel alarmed," he said hopefully. "I do not think his life is in any danger. This conspiracy is not for murder. It is a gigantic plot to extort vast sums of money, and to smash the stock market. I will foil both, take my word for it."

"I am rejoiced to hear you say so. You encourage me greatly, Mr. Carter."

"And you must follow my instructions."

"I will, sir, to the letter. What shall I do?"

"Do nothing more than state, when occasion requires it, that Mr. Morton has gone out of town on business and you cannot say just when he will return," Nick instructed her.

"Nothing but that, Mr. Carter?"

"Absolutely nothing," Nick said impressively. "That will serve temporarily to explain his absence, and will make it less difficult for his associates to support the market. I will confer with them to-morrow morning before the market opens. The scoundrels engaged in this conspiracy shall derive no advantage from these abductions, unless they publish the facts themselves; and if they do that—well, if I fail to trace the story to its source, I'll throw up my vocation."

Nick's voice had an ominous ring, and his frowning eyes a gleam speaking louder than words. He lingered only to add a few words of advice and encouragement for Miss Morton, then hurriedly departed with Patsy.

"You didn't see any man in the taxicab, eh?" he asked, when they reached the street.

"I didn't, chief," said Patsy. "There may have been one, for all that, crouching in the farther corner. I'll admit I couldn't have seen him in the darkness."

"I'll wager one was there."

"I guess you're right."

"Did you notice the number on the taxicab?"

"No, sir. I didn't think of it, nor suspect such a crafty job," said Patsy dismally. "Gee! but I've been awfully lame—as lame as an old, spavined, broken-down truck horse."

"There, cut that out, Patsy, and make good for the rest of the game," Nick said heartily, clapping him on the shoulder.

"I'll do that, chief, you can bet."

"We'll have a talk with Chick when he gets home, and decide what——"

"Gets home!" Patsy exclaimed, interrupting. "Hadn't he returned when you left?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

Patsy hastened to disclose what he had seen in the Broad Street building, and how he had lost track of Chick.

Nick heard him without interrupting, then said shortly:

"He may have returned by this time. If not, and he fails to show up before morning, we'll seek his trail where it was lost. We must get this gang, Patsy, before they can smash the market. Millions are at stake. Viewed from a money standpoint, I never had a bigger job on my hands. We must get them, Patsy."

"We'll do it, chief," Patsy confidently declared. "I've got a sure hunch that we'll do it."

Nick made no reply.

It was half-past seven when they reached home and entered the business office. Instead of finding Chick Carter there, as they hoped, Joseph hastened to bring from Nick's study a letter left by a special messenger scarce ten minutes before.

Nick glanced at the address, his own name, then broke the seal and read the inclosed communication:

"My Dear Carter: I believe I told you, when we were discussing my abduction syndicate project, that I would write you when I was about to begin operations. Just a line, therefore, to inform you that I already have secured three golden geese, and have early designs upon others. I also have in my game bag your man Chick. He and one of the geese were brought down to-day. I next am going to get YOU.

"You should expect no less. For I know you to be my bitter foe, and I am yours.

"Leopold Duchane,
"President of Duchane Abduction Syndicate."

CHAPTER VII.

A CHANGE OF BASE.

Knocked out by the blow received by Manuel Vasca, fully half an hour had elapsed before Chick Carter began to revive. With returning consciousness came a feeling of bondage, an aching head, the sound of subdued voices, vague at first, but becoming more distinct when the cobwebs began to clear from his brain.

Inured to such experiences, Chick's first thought was of himself, what had befallen him, where he was, and in what danger; for peril and precautions against it are present in a detective's mind.

Chick very soon realized that he was not alone, that he had the worst of it in some way, and he ventured to peer from under one drooping eyelid—and all that occurred was instantly recalled.

"Down and out," he said to himself. "They handed me a good one, for fair, and now have me tied in a chair. Yes, by Jove, and my disguise has been removed. They have discovered my identity. Well, I've got it on them in one respect, at least; they think me still in dreamland. I'll make the most of it."

Chick saw at a glance that he had not been removed from the room in which he had been knocked out, the location and original use of which were obvious.

"It's a storeroom lying back of the main office, yet connecting with it only through the room in which that trick blackboard masks the door. That was put up to hide the door and provide a secret headquarters for Vasca. Like a spider in a hole, he has been directing his work from this place. That fake messenger was sneaking in here to report to him, evidently about a design upon Morton, or his daughter. If I'm in wrong just at present, I'm in the lair of the wolves, at least, and the members of this big brokerage firm are of the pack. Patsy may get wise, however, when I fail to rejoin him."

While thus sizing up the situation, Chick was stealthily viewing his surroundings and the several persons then in the room, as well as listening to their discussion. He saw that there was a second door, evidently leading into a back entry, accessible from a rear door of the building, which he rightly inferred was used by persons wishing to visit the room unobserved.

A single incandescent lamp lighted the room. Near one wall was a flat desk, at which Vasca was seated, talking earnestly with three of his confederates. One of them was Murdock. Another was the red-featured man who had held up the detective, and who, Chick afterward learned, was James Dudley, the senior member of the brokerage firm.

The third was a large, powerful man of nearly sixty, with broad shoulders, a massive head, grizzled hair and a strong, determined face.

"By Jove, that's Tom Kinnicut," thought Chick, who knew the man by sight. "He's one of the boldest operators in the market, and always at the head of a big pool. He's said to be worth millions, but his reputation is none of the best. 'Wolves' is right, for fair, since he's in with this bunch. These are the brokers, most likely, who execute his orders in the market. They are all in wrong and on the rocks, as Nick sus-

ects, and are making a desperate criminal play to get ven."

A glance in his direction caused Chick to lower his eyelid, and he contented himself for several minutes with listening only.

"Are you sure this fellow is Chick Carter?" Kinnicut asked, after a brief scrutiny.

"Sure of it!" snarled Vasca bitterly. "I ought to be sure, having twice been up against him. Yes, I'm too infernally sure."

"Nick Carter, then, must have a line on this place."

"Bah! That don't follow. Quite the contrary, in fact."

"How do you make that out? What sent Chick Carter here, then?"

"That's just the point—what did send him here?" Vasca questioned, with sinister shrewdness. "If Nick Carter has any suspicion of this firm, or knows anything about this place, or my whereabouts, none of his assistants would have sneaked in here as this fellow did. He knew nothing about this room and stumbled upon the masked door only by chance."

"But why was he here at all, Vasca, is the question?" Dudley growled apprehensively.

"A question easily answered," Vasca retorted. "He probably saw Murdock watching Morton's daughter, before Murdock discovered him. It was for that reason he had his eye on her, and, afterward seeing Murdock enter your office, he changed his disguise and followed him."

"That may explain it," Kinnicut allowed.

"It would be like him, too, the infernal meddler," Vasca added virulently. "Missing Murdock in the next room, he detected the blackboard door and the one within, and was investigating it when you held him up. That's all there was to it, or he'd not have been caught hands down. None of Carter's kennel goes lame in that fashion."

"That's true," Kinnicut now declared. "You're right, Vasca, after all. If he had known anything definite, he wouldn't have been caught napping."

"Furthermore," Vasca went on; "he can take no advantage of what he has learned. We've got him foul, Kinnicut, and I'll look after him."

"You will, eh?"

"Trust me for that. He shall not give me the slip. I've got the goods that will put him so sound asleep that only Gabriel's trumpet will wake him. He'll get his, all right, the instant I scent danger."

"But he must not remain here," Dudley protested. "I'm not taking that risk, along with all the rest."

"Nor shall I remain here," Vasca quickly asserted. "That would be like flying into the face of fate. There is a remote possibility, of course, that this office may be suspected, particularly after Chick Carter mysteriously disappears. There are two things to be done to-night. Another must be accomplished as quickly as possible."

"What are the two?" Kinnicut inquired.

"First, we must get Morton. That already is fixed and as good as done."

"The other?"

"I've got to change my base of operations, as Dudley intimated, and remove this infernal detective."

"Where to?"

"There is no place better than your own, Kinnicut."

"Not in town?"

"No, in Westchester."

"You're already using that. Besides, you thought it would be too far from the scene of your work."

"My work has progressed so rapidly and successfully that I now can proceed with it from a distance," Vasca replied. "There, moreover, I shall have all hands under my eye. Morton having been secured, I will engineer the abduction of two more of his pool. I already have laid my plans. That done, leaving only one at work against me, the market will crumble under its own weight."

"It has stood firmly enough to-day against our attacks, God knows," Dudley exclaimed, with a growl.

"Bah! We have only just begun. Wait until the support of to-day is withdrawn. Carter's hand was back of that. It was the result of Morton's visit. I foresaw it and had Murdock watch the detective's house. He saw Morton go there. This brings me to that other move that must be made as quickly as possible."

"What is that?"

"We must get Nick Carter."

"Abduct him?"

"Or remove him," snapped Vasca, as vicious as a hungry dog. "Either that, or he may block us with obstacles we cannot overcome. I'll devise a way to get him, or to wipe him out. Nothing less will serve."

"If you succeed," thought Chick; "you shall have a medal."

"When will you get at that?" Kennicut asked.

"Within two days," said Vasca confidently. "I will submit my plans to our syndicate at its meeting to-night. In the meantime, proceed each with your

affairs as if this trifling incident had not occurred. Leave all the rest to me."

"But what's to be done with this fellow?"

"Have I not stated that I will look after him? At midnight, when I rejoin you, he shall be as securely caged as our golden geese. Leave him to me."

Kinnicut arose cautiously, opened the door and peered into the back entry, then departed without a word.

Dudley whispered briefly to Vasca, too low for Chick to overhear, then withdrew by the way he had entered, carefully closing both doors.

There remained, besides Chick Carter, only Murdock and the master crook who had originated the colossal scheme which he was, with unwavering assurance and tireless energy, proceeding to execute.

"What next?" Murdock tersely asked.

Instead of replying immediately, Vasca turned to his desk and rapidly wrote and sealed a brief letter.

"This to Hobart," he said shortly. "Having caged Morton, as planned, he will return with the taxicab at ten to-night. He will stop at the court entrance at precisely that hour. We will have him ready."

The last was with an indifferent wave of his hand in the direction of the detective.

"Want any help before evening?" asked Murdock.

"For what?"

"To look after him."

"No." Vasca spoke with a sneer. "Looking after him is child's play. Return at eight."

"I'll be on time," Murdock assured him, then stole out through the rear door.

Manuel Vasca gazed at Chick for a moment, then approached and felt his pulse.

Bound hand and foot to his chair, Chick pretended he was still unconscious, thinking it might be to his disadvantage if suspected of having overheard what had been said.

Vasca returned to his desk, furtively watched by the detective. Opening one of the drawers, he took out a small vial, and a hypodermic syringe, which he deliberately proceeded to fill with a dark fluid.

"Here's where I get mine," thought Chick, with impotent resentment. "More jugglery with his infernal drugs. I wish I was free for just one minute. I'd put an end to that reptile. There's no use in kicking, whether I go out for good, or only temporarily. I'll keep my discoveries to myself and take what comes."

Vasca had approached him again. Crouching beside the chair, as vile a miscreant as crawled the earth, he drew up one of the detective's sleeves and plunged the needle into his forearm.

Chick Carter did not wince.

Almost immediately, however, a feeling of weakness seized him. Before the needle was fairly withdrawn, he knew he was losing consciousness. The faint sounds from the outer office, the presence of the crouching cur, the touch of his foul hands, the tingle left by the needle—all faded into the deepening gloom of oblivion.

Chick could not tell how long he remained insensible. Rugged to the core, he threw off more quickly than was expected the effects of the drug Vasca had administered. He became conscious of the chill of the wintry air, and of strong hands bearing him out of the building.

Chick was still securely bound, and a cloth had been tied over his mouth; but he caught a glimpse of the starry sky, the glaring lights of a taxicab, and the dark figures of several men—all only vaguely, however.

"Kinnicut's place—Westchester—that's where!" he thought dreamily. "Vasca is making—his change of base."

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT NICK DISCOVERED.

Nick Carter paid no attention to Manuel Vasca's threatening letter. Its several statements, made with mocking exultation, were like wasted ammunition. Nick already knew that Morton had been abducted. That Chick had met with a mishap and possibly fallen into Vasca's hands also was suspected. He had, in fact, anticipated the very information which the miscreant had, with taunting defiance, supposed he could impart.

Nick read the letter to Patsy, then tossed it into his wastebasket.

"Gee! he's certainly got a crust," was Patsy's comment.

"And got Chick, too, evidently."

"Do you believe it?"

"Yes."

"But not that he'll get you?"

"That is precisely what I believe, if he makes the attempt."

"You do?" questioned Patsy, surprised.

"Yes. I would like nothing better than to find my-

elf in the midst of the vipers. Take my word for it, somebody would get hurt."

"Oh, I see! You mean that you'd take long chances in order to find them."

"The longest ever," Nick replied. "But that's neither here nor there. We must tackle the case as we find it."

"That's right," Patsy admitted. "Maybe, chief, I could find some one who noticed the number of that taxicab."

"There would be nothing in that."

"No?"

"Vasca would not leave himself open in that way," said Nick. "The number would be a false one."

"Most likely, after all. But we must find some way of tracing Chick. Have you any plans?"

"Yes. You go to the Stock Exchange to-morrow and hang around in the galleries. Watch the floor brokers carefully, and get the names of those who are making the most violent bear attacks. I'll try to find out from them who are the big operators on the short side. The rascals we want are among them, you can bet on that."

"I think so, too," nodded Patsy.

"In the meantime, I'll try to pick up Chick's trail where you lost it." Nick added. "I'll see what I can learn from Dudley, Deacon, and Scott, or in their office."

"That's the stuff, chief! But look out for Vasca."

"I'll look out for him, all right—but not as you mean," Nick said dryly.

At half-past eight the following morning, having advised them by telephone, Nick held a secret conference with the three remaining members of Morton's bull pool, informing them of Morton's abduction, and warning them to be constantly guarded against any semblance of trickery by which they might suffer the same fate, and vigorously to carry out the instructions Morton had already given them, firmly to support the market at whatever cost.

At ten o'clock, carefully disguised, he entered the office of the suspected brokers and mingled with the throng of speculators excitedly watching the market fluctuations. There was nothing on the surface to incite suspicion, and Nick sauntered from one room to another, pretending to be interested only in the trend of prices, and he finally brought up in the room in which Dudley had cornered Chick.

The blackboard had been removed. The door was open that led into the room Vasca had so recently occupied, and the room itself then contained only the desk, a couple of chairs, and several piles of old books and dusty letter files. One might reasonably have inferred that they had been there for weeks.

Nevertheless, constantly having in mind all the known facts, and alert to possibilities consistent with them, Nick no sooner saw the second door of the storeroom than he received an impression. Acting upon it, he left the office and made his way to the back door of the building, where he discovered a narrow stairway leading up to the several floors, also the door entering the storeroom adjoining the brokerage office.

Crouching, he examined the knob, also the floor close to the threshold, using a powerful lens.

"No dust on the knob," he muttered. "It has recently been handled. And the dirt and slight moisture on the threshold plainly show that men with muddy boots have lately entered—very lately, too, or the moisture would not remain.

"H'm, I guess I've discovered the rats in the corncrib, or some of them, at least. It would have been easy to have lured Chadwick and Deland into this office, after they left Morton's that afternoon. It would have been equally easy to have held them up and got away with them later. This is the last place, too, Chick is known to have been seen in. Decidedly significant, taken all in all."

Nick arose and returned to the brokers' office. Finding in one of the rooms a chair from which he could see the clerks' inclosure and the door leading into the private office of the firm, Nick seated himself and proceeded to watch furtively for something inviting suspicion.

The minutes lengthened into hours, yet Nick still remained there. Not until nearly three o'clock, when one of the most violent markets known for years was coming to a close, did he detect anything of special interest. What he then saw, moreover, would have been insignificant to one less discerning, less capable of correctly reading human faces.

He saw Dudley come out of the private office with an open letter in his hand, which he displayed to the junior member of the firm, Jason Scott, who was writing at the desk of the absent clerk. The two men discussed the letter in subdued tones for several minutes, after which Dudley tore it in pieces and tossed it into the wastebasket.

Nick waited until the market had closed, then departed in company with the throng of speculators who at once began trooping out. His next move was to find the janitor of the building, a short, gray-eyed Irishman, named Dolan.

Nick found him alone in the basement, wheeling a large rubbish car toward a rear elevator, with a mop and couple of brooms in his hand.

"You're the janitor, I take it," said Nick, stopping him.

"I am sor, sure," was the reply.

"What's your name?"

"Tim Dolan, sor."

"Mine is Nick Carter. Did you ever hear of him?"

"Did I?" Dolan's gray eyes lighted. "Faith, sor, who hasn't?"

Nick displayed his badge and nodded, laughing quietly.

"I want your assistance, Dolan," he said; "and I also want you to say nothing about it. Can I trust you?"

"You can that," Dolan roundly asserted. "As far as you can throw a potato ball from a sharp stick."

"Good enough," said Nick. "Your eyes vouch for your honesty. I suspect tenants here of not being quite on the square."

"And you're after thim?"

"Merely looking into the matter, Dolan," Nick replied evasively. "How about the back door of this building. Is it locked nights?"

"Sure, sor, it is. I look after it meself and am the only wan with a key."

"What time do you usually lock it?"

"Along about eight, sor."

"And then go home?"

"I do, sor, after stopping for a schooner, or two."

"I see," smiled Nick. "What are you going to do, now?"

"Clean out some of the rooms, sor, of the rubbish and waste paper. I run that out every day 'bout this time, mostly from the brokers' rooms, where there's a lot of it collects."

"Dudley, Deacon, and Scott's office among them?"

"Yes, sor, always."

"Capital!" said Nick. "I want a wastebasket, Dolan, that is in their office. Can you get it for me without their knowing it?"

"Sure, you can go in and get it yourself," Dolan vouchsafed, with a grin. "Thin you'll be sure to get the right wan."

"How so, Dolan?"

"Faith, it's offen I have a man helping me. I'll lend you a blouse and overalls, along with an old hat. You can go along with me, as offen happens, and none will be the wiser." Dolan made the bull unconsciously.

"Fine!" Nick declared approvingly. "We'll go at it at once. I'll change this disguise for another and be with you in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

The preparations were made in the janitor's basement room, and Nick then helped him roll the car upon a rear elevator, on which they went up to the second floor. Ten minutes later, Nick had the desired wastebasket and was busily searching its contents.

Contrary to his anticipation, he could find no torn letter among the crumpled scraps of paper, the nature of which he could quickly determine. He had been searching vainly for a quarter hour and was feeling much disappointed, when he suddenly discovered that there were numerous fragments of a torn sheet that were blank on both sides.

With suspicion renewed, Nick heated one of the fragments near the flame of a match—and a few written lines quickly appeared.

"Just so!" he muttered. "Invisible ink was used, as a guard against miscarriage, or chance exposure. The exposure, as it happens, will be something more than chance."

Nick carefully collected all of the blank fragments, paid Dolan liberally for his aid, and then hastened home.

Seated in his business office, he united the torn edges of the scraps of paper, pasting them in proper juxtaposition on a transparent sheet of wax paper, and soon found that he had all but a small corner fragment of the torn letter.

Heating the sheet thus prepared, the following easily read communication was brought to light:

"My Dear Dudley: Special meeting of the syndicate Friday night at ten o'clock. All members must be present. Notify them. I will then have Nick Carter securely in our clutches. Have devised a scheme by which he can be easily and safely plucked. Nan will aid me, so you will not need to notify her. *Semper vigilans.* Vasca."

Nick Carter's strong, clean-cut face took on a curious expression while he read this letter, a mingling of wonderment, determination, and contempt not easily described. While still he was scanning the printed sheet, Patsy hurriedly entered, at once crying impulsively:

"Gee! there's been a wicked market, chief. It has been held all right, as you predicted; but, holy smoke!

ilk about a den of wild cats—it wouldn't be in it with that bunch. A chap who spends five hours in that pit of perdition earns his dough. I've got the names of the biggest bear brokers, all right."

"So have I, Patsy."

"Dudley, Deacon, and Scott?"

"Yes."

"How did you get wise?"

Nick informed him and showed him Vasca's letter to Dudley, which Patsy read twice through, with eyes dilating.

"Great guns!" he exclaimed, gazing at Nick. "Going to pluck you, is he?"

"That's what he predicts."

"He seems mighty sure of it."

"Yes, very."

"What do you s'pose he's got up his sleeve?"

"Give it up, Nick said tersely. "You'll have to ask me an easier one."

"Friday—that's to-morrow," said Patsy, glancing again at the letter. "You've not long to wait, chief."

"So much the better."

"Gee! is there any better to it? That miscreant has got the others, as he threatened, and he may get you. Ain't you going to do anything about it?"

"No," said Nick, with absolute indifference. "I'm going to leave that to Vasca. Give a rascal rope enough, Patsy, and he'll nearly always hang himself. Let Vasca do his worst. There then may be some plucking done of which he doesn't dream."

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRAP SPRUNG.

"Ah," Nick Carter quietly exclaimed. "From the woman in the plot. She's coming to spread the net."

Nick was seated at his desk that Friday morning, looking over his mail. The letter he still was scanning, which evoked the above comments, bore the name of a woman, Nancy Gibson, and was neatly written with a pen. It informed the detective that she had very important business to lay before him, and that she would call on him at two o'clock that day.

Nick laid it aside and resumed his occupation.

At ten o'clock he was interrupted by a telephone call from Nancy Gibson, who stated that she rang him up to inquire whether he had received her letter, and whether she could see him at two o'clock sharp.

Nick answered both questions in the affirmative.

Just before the appointed hour, he seated himself in his study and stationed Patsy in an adjoining room. In the wall between them, however, was a cleverly screened opening, through which Patsy was able to see all that transpired and hear all that might be said.

Promptly at two o'clock an automobile stopped at Nick's residence, and Joseph admitted the expected woman and conducted her to the detective's study, closing the door when he withdrew.

Nick surveyed her with considerable interest, and was at once convinced that she was the woman who had so successfully deceived Claudia Morton.

She was a well-built, attractive brunette, about thirty years old, and was clad in a dark-blue dress and hat, and a tight-fitting fur jacket. She had an air of gentility, a determined manner and the appearance of a woman of nerve; for she displayed not the slightest sign of trepidation, despite her evil mission.

"You are Mr. Carter, the detective?" she said inquiringly, with a subtle, metalicike ring in her steady voice.

"Yes." Nick bowed. "Be seated. I presume that you are Miss Gibson."

"Mrs. Gibson." She corrected him, without the shadow of a smile. "I am a widow."

"Ah!" Nick rejoined. "Pardon my mistake. What is the important business mentioned in your letter?"

"I am glad you come to it at once," said Nancy, with a nod of approval.

"My time is of value, madam."

"I will not be less expeditious. The business relates to a man who has done me a wrong. He has made promises which he refuses to fulfill. He has been a traitor to me. I wish to pay him back in his own coin."

"Such a case would not interest me, Mrs. Gibson," said Nick. "It is not in my line."

"On the contrary, Mr. Carter, it will deeply interest you, and is strictly in your line," said Nancy, with sinister assurance.

"Why do you think so?"

"Because the man with whom I wish to break even, repaying treachery with treachery, is one you are very anxious to find."

"What is his name?"

"Leopold Duchane."

Nick started up in his chair slightly, pretending not only to be surprised, but as deeply interested as the woman had predicted.

"What do you know about Leopold Duchane?" he asked.

"All about him."

"You should know, then, that that is not his true name."

"Nor is Manuel Vasca his true name," said Nancy, a bit curtly. "He has more names than you could remember. His name matters little, Mr. Carter, since you know to whom I refer."

"How has he wronged you?"

"He promised me love, marriage, and fortune. I have absolute proof that he will bestow neither upon me. He is a traitor."

"If you know the man so well and are informed of his evil character, you should not want such things from him," said Nick. "Otherwise, you must be evil yourself."

"I have not come here to discuss my character, nor

to make any revelations about myself," Nancy retorted. "I have come here only to make you an offer."

"What do you expect in return?"

"Nothing. If you accept my offer, the revenge I shall attain will pay me better than gold. I ask nothing from you."

"What is your offer, Mrs. Gibson?" Nick inquired. "I will hear what you have to say."

"It may be briefly stated," Nancy quickly answered. "I know what Vasca has been doing since his escape from Sing Sing. I know all about his abduction syndicate. I was his assistant day before yesterday in the abduction of George H. Morton, the millionaire. I know where Vasca is at this moment, where his victims are confined, and I know that he will hold a meeting of his so-called syndicate this very night. I will expose them, Mr. Carter, and throw them into your hands."

"You will?"

"Yes—on one condition."

"Namely?"

"That it shall be done as I direct."

"Why as you direct?"

"I have self-preservation to think of and secrets that I will not suffer to be unveiled," Nancy said firmly. "I have planned a way by which this can be done, enabling me to guard myself as I desire, and you to arrest Vasca and his entire gang. I will consent to do so in no other way, however, and that's all there is to it. It's up to you, Mr. Carter, to accept or reject."

"What is your plan, Mrs. Gibson?"

"Though convinced that Vasca is a traitor to me, I have not betrayed my conviction. He still believes me loyal to him and his confederates. I persuaded him yesterday to add a relative of mine to his gang, or so I told him; a cousin who is out of work. Vasca consented to let me introduce him to-day, and promised to swear him into the syndicate to-night."

"What is this to me?"

"You, Mr. Carter, are the man I had in mind."

"Ah, I see," said Nick. "You propose to land me, evidently, right in the midst of these vultures."

"Precisely," Nancy coolly nodded. "I know, of course, that you can accomplish nothing to-night. What you accomplish later will depend upon yourself."

"And you?"

"I shall have done mine. In the meantime, I shall succeed in getting out of the country and find safety abroad. The service I do you, Mr. Carter, shall give me immunity from arrest."

"I agree with you," said Nick. "When and where must I join you, in order to accept this offer?"

"You must go with me at once."

"Why the haste?"

"Unless I return within a reasonable time, Vasca may become suspicious. Exposure would cost us our lives."

"No doubt. Still——"

"I have made myself perfectly plain, Mr. Carter," Nancy interrupted. "Nothing you can say would cause me to deviate from the plans I have laid. It is up to you to accept them immediately, for my speedy return is imperative. I have a motor car at your door, and unless you——"

Nick arose, checking her with a gesture.

"We will not incur exposure by needless delay," he said decisively. "I accept your offer and will be ready in three minutes. I must put on a disguise and get my heavy coat."

"I will wait," Nancy said simply, yet there was a gleam of secret triumph in the depths of her sinister eyes.

Nick strode out of the room and signaled for Patsy to follow him, at once leading the way upstairs.

"Gee! you're not going into that trap, chief, are you?" Patsy asked apprehensively, when they were out of hearing.

"Yes."

"Great guns! She's got a car and chauffeur, chief, and I can't follow you on such short notice."

"There'll be no need of it. I want you to remain right here."

"But you may be downed before you can let me know where she takes you."

"Not if the chicken comes home to roost, Patsy," said Nick pointedly. "Listen to me and follow my instructions to the letter."

Nancy Gibson had been waiting precisely three minutes when the detective, carefully disguised and wearing a heavy freize overcoat, hurried down the stairs and rejoined her.

"Ready," he said shortly.

"You are prompt," replied Nancy. "Come."

They left the house, Nick in advance, and entered the motor car. He merely glanced at the chauffeur, and in a moment they were running north in defiance of the speed limit.

It was half-past three when they arrived at their destination—an isolated graystone mansion of bygone days, located in one of the hilly sections of Westchester County, and hidden from general observation by the park covering its spacious grounds. The chauffeur run the car under a porte-cochère, and the door of the house was opened almost immediately by —Manuel Vasca.

"Ah, Nan, got back, eh?" he cried, with a sinister leer. "And you bring your cousin, I see."

"Yes," Nan replied, alighting. "His name is Dugan. Shake hands with Mr. Vasca, Tom."

"Very glad to meet you, Mr. Vasca," said Nick truthfully.

"Same to you, Mr. Dugan," Vasca laughed mirthlessly. "Come into the house. It's a bit cold out of doors. You'll find it warm enough in here."

"No doubt," thought Nick, without replying.

"Sit down in the library, Dugan. I'll be with you after having a word with Nancy."

"No rush," said Nick indifferently. "I'll wait."

He entered the library, a large, old-fashioned room, and took a seat near the window. For several moments he glanced sharply around, but could detect no sign of a spy.

Presently, on a scrap of paper on the edge of his chair, out of any possibility of observation, he wrote a few words with a stubby pencil. Then his right hand glided into a hidden pocket under the skirt of his greatcoat.

For about a minute he deftly manipulated something in the pocket, then arose and backed up to the window—with his eyes steadily upon the open hall door.

Noiselessly, with his hands behind him, he raised the window about three inches.

There was a faint flutter, audible for an instant only, and then there remained only—silence.

Nick Carter closed the window and sat down.

Half a minute later the heavy tread of approaching men sounded in the hall, and Vasca entered the room with two of his confederates—Hobart, the chauffeur, and wiry Mr. Murdock.

"Friends of mine, Dugan," he said with a grin, after introducing them.

"Glad to meet them, too," said Nick heartily.

"Take off your coat, Dugan. I said you would find it warm here."

"Yes, so 'tis," Nick nodded, with a glance at the blazing logs in the fireplace while he arose to comply.

"At the same time," added Vasca, with a quick gesture; "take off your disguise, Mr. Carter, and throw up your hands. Don't venture to do anything more. You'll find it warm enough here, I promise you."

"Trapped, by thunder!" Nick exclaimed, in accents of dismay—though he was not in the least surprised.

He stood gazing into the deadly muzzles of three leveled revolvers in the hands of his captors.

CHAPTER X.

HOW NICK CARTER MADE GOOD.

Ten o'clock.

A long dining room in the house in Westchester. Closed shutteres without and drawn curtains within. Oil lamps in bronze brackets on the wainscoted walls. In the middle of the room a long table, covered with dark cloth, at which ten men and one woman were seated. All except one were masked.

The exception was Manuel Vasca.

In chairs lined up against the wall five men were seated, each bound hand and foot and tied to his chair—Nick Carter, Chick Carter, Morton, Chadwick, and Deland, three multimillionaires of world-wide reputation.

The abduction syndicate had convened, and Vasca, its originator, its spokesman, and director general, had called the meeting to order.

The faces of the three magnates looked pale and apprehensive; those of Nick Carter and Chick, grim and sternly determined.

Manuel Vasca was the first to break the silence, following immaterial episodes and observations preceding that moment.

"I don't like the look in your eyes, Carter," he said, with sinister austerity. "You ought not to be surprised at what has occurred. Knowing me, you should have expected no less. I predicted this moment. I warned you that I would get these men—and get you."

"You did well, Vasca, when you got me," Nick coldly answered, with subtle irony.

It was not wasted upon the master crook. His black brows lowered perceptibly. His eyes took on a threatening gleam.

"Do you mock me even now?" he demanded, with a snarl. "Are you blind to the fact that I have you in my power, that in removing you I have removed the only obstacle to the designs which——"

"I am blind to nothing, Vasca, that relates to this knavish conspiracy," Nick sternly interrupted.

"Indeed!"

Vasca spoke with an incredulous sneer, but the several other men seated at the table moved uneasily.

"You were bold enough to tell me at the outset, not of what your foul scheme consisted, but of a project designed to blind me to the truth. You failed to deceive me—as you since have failed to carry out your true scheme."

"Failed! Does this look like failure?"

"To one capable of looking below the surface—yes!"

"Below the surface—what do you mean by that?" Vasca growled harshly.

"That you do not know evinces your own blindness, your inability to cope successfully with me."

"Cope successfully with you—bah! You are in my power."

"You began with failure and will end with failure," Nick sternly insisted. "You began with pretending you would abduct these men for the purpose of extorting a ransom. That was not your object."

"Is that so?"

"Your true design, framed up to meet the need of a crowd of speculating plungers, caught so short of stocks that they have become crooks in the hope of retrieving their losses—your true design was to abduct these magnates in order to open the way to violent attacks upon the market and to induce a panic. Your abduction syndicate is made up of these same shorts, seated with you at that table. You have failed, Vasca, failed most egregiously. For at my instigation, despite the advantage you obtained, the market has been firmly supported."

"Supported—bah!" Vasca sneered scornfully. "The market still exists, under conditions even more strained. We shall break it—break it to atoms, Carter. Either

that, or I will remove more of its supporters. You no longer will be able to dictate the course they shall take."

"There no longer will be need of it."

"No longer need of it?"

"To-morrow the market will recover, will regain its former strength, will advance under buying caused by the exposure of your knavish conspiracy—and the fact that you and your confederates occupy prison cells."

Nick's stern voice had taken on a sharper ring.

Looks of wonderment appeared on the faces of the listening magnates.

The masked men at the tables shifted nervously in their chairs.

Vasca scowled more darkly, with features drawn and lips twitching.

"Why do you say that?" he snarled fiercely.

"Because it is true."

"Bah! You are mad."

Nick drew forward in his chair, with eyes flashing.

"It was you who were mad, Vasca, when you brought me here," he sternly asserted. "I neither know nor care why you have convened your gang of crooks and brought us before you, nor have I patience to prolong this unprofitable intercourse. You were mad, I repeat, when you brought me here. You thought I could not be followed——"

"Nor could you!" snapped Vasca, interrupting.

"You reasoned," Nick sternly went on; "that you could secure me before I could reveal my whereabouts, as well as your own, and the precise hour when you and your entire gang could be caught here. Again, Vasca, you have failed."

"Failed!"

"You think me in your power," cried Nick. "Instead, you are in mine."

Several of the masked men half started from their chairs, only to drop back again when Vasca fairly shrieked, with a wildly derisive laugh:

"Your power—absurd! You have lost your head, Carter. The proof of the pudding is the eating, and you shall——"

"Behold the proof, then!" Nick thundered, interrupting.

His ringing words were followed by a piercing whistle.

It was instantly echoed by one from without.

Then came the smash of breaking windows, the crash of doors hurled from their hinges, the heavy tread of men rushing through the halls and into the room, policemen in uniform, plain-clothes men from the Central Office, and above all the wildly triumphant cry of Patsy Garvan, as he thrust himself through a broken window, revolver in hand, and yelled at the top of his lungs:

"Right here, chief! The chicken came home to roost."

The masked men at the table had leaped to their feet.

Vasca, with a shriek of fury, whipped out a revolver and raised it to fire at the man who had thrice foiled him.

Patsy's weapon rang out on the instant, and the bullet went true.

Manuel Vasca threw both hands into the air, uttered one wild cry, and pitched face forward upon the table, shot through the head.

What followed may be told in few and simple words. With the fall of Manuel Vasca, who was instantly killed, his horrified confederates yielded without a struggle to the officers who had poured into the room. Within a very few minutes all were secured, including the three members of the brokerage firm, Dudley, Deacon & Scott, the big bear operator, Tom Kinnicut and five of his associates in a secret bear pool, as well as Hobart, Murdock, and Nancy Gibson. All were soon on their way to the Tombs, and subsequently received and served the sentences legally incurred by their crimes.

Nick Carter and the three magnates were speedily released, and the manner in which the remarkable denouement had been brought about was then made known. The scrap of paper on which Nick had written immediately after his arrival at the house, revealing its precise location, had been slipped into a quill attached to the leg of a homing pigeon, several of which Nick kept in one of his attic rooms, and one of which he had brought with him in a secret pocket made expressly for that purpose.

Within sixty minutes after the bird's release from the library window, Patsy was reading Nick's message, and was in a position to follow instructions given him just before they parted, resulting in the successful raids in response to Nick's signal.

Thus it was that Nick Carter made good, and the effects were all that he had predicted. The exposure of the conspiracy and arrest of the conspirators put new blood into the market, and Morton and his associates carried their big combine to a desirable culmination.

The profits derived by Nick Carter, whose deductions from the outset had been entirely correct, were in keeping with the great work that he had done and the responsibilities he had taken.

With the death of Manuel Vasca, one of the greatest crooks of the times had been removed, and Nick Carter rightly remarked that the world was the better for his being out of it.

THE END.

In "The Silent Witness; or, Nick Carter's Quandary," you will find one of the most interesting and puzzling cases the great detective ever had. With all the evidence in—and some of it apparently as plain as print—Nick Carter, with his wonderful intuition, announced that the plot of the crime was entirely different from what it clearly seemed. As to whether he was right in his judgment, you shall see next week. No. 734—out January 21st.

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THE CONDUCTOR'S CHARGE.

By W. B. HAYS.

"Well, where are you going, my little man?"

The bluff-voiced conductor looked down upon a mite of a lad sitting painfully erect on the very edge of the cushioned seat.

Two or three bundles, neatly tied with a red string, and a very ancient carpetbag, occupied the remainder of the space, and, as the boy glanced up, he instinctively threw his arm around his possessions, with a queer, suspicious motion, which caused an old lady in the rear seat to smile in a sympathetic manner.

The conductor repeated his question in a higher key, and, raising his green-shaded lantern, held out a hand for tickets. As he did so he noticed a small white placard stitched to the boy's vest.

"Ah, what's this!" he exclaimed, stooping over to take a nearer view. "Another 'conductor's charge,' eh?"

Holding the lamp nearer, he read aloud from the card:

"MR. CONDUCTOR: Please see that the bearer, Dicky Adams, has a safe conduct to the end of your division. He carries tickets to Chicago in the inside pocket of his coat. He is dumb."

"The poor dear, what a pity!" came from the old lady, and she reached over and patted him softly on his shining black hair with a motherly touch grateful to see.

"Yes, it is rather tough on the youngster," said the good-natured official. "But, bless my soul, we can't all be perfect, ma'am! Now for that ticket. He's deaf, too, I hope. Are you, my lad?"

Dicky shook his head vigorously, and, with a wistful look in his large, solemn eyes, made several rapid movements with his fingers.

"Sorry to say I can't understand ye," interrupted the conductor, pausing in his examination of the long folder he had taken from the lad's pocket. "But never mind, we'll look after you, and speak a good word to the fellow on the next division. Here, just put this slip in your cap and keep it in sight."

As he passed on up the aisle he quietly turned back the seat in front, and, with a kindly nod, intimated to Dicky that both seats were at his disposal.

After he had gone the boy sat motionless for a while, staring through the car window at the ghostly review of trees and cheerless plains; then, tiring of this, he happened to glance back at the old lady.

She was awake, and gave him such a friendly nod that his face brightened up wonderfully, and the look of melancholy, which seemed to form such a part of his nature, faded away like the passing shadow of a summer cloud.

She leaned over and kissed him.

"Bless your dear heart! I am so sorry you can't talk to me, an' tell where you belong. Been long out in these parts?"

A nod of the head.

"Well, well; do tell! An' what's the name of the town you—here I go again! Tryin' to ask you questions when I know you can't answer me."

At that moment a gentleman occupying a seat on the other side of the aisle turned to her with the remark:

"Permit me to interpret for you, madam. I have had some experience with the deaf-and-dumb alphabet."

Then, looking toward Dicky, he entered into an animated conversation, the silent words flowing from his fingers in one increasing stream.

It was a study to watch the boy's face. Every emotion seemed depicted thereon. He responded eagerly to the newcomer's friendly questions, and then, in answer to one, made such a long explanation that the old lady, her mouth wide open, fell to keeping time with the movements with her head.

Finally the gentleman ceased, and explained to her that Dicky lived in a small Kansas town with an uncle, who was sending him to Chicago to see what could be done toward curing him.

"The lad says he was ill in bed for many months with some disease, and, when he finally recovered, his voice suddenly left him. He has never been able to speak since."

"Now, that's what I call a cryin' shame," exclaimed his auditor. Then, addressing Dicky, she said:

"Don't lose heart, my pore boy. I feel sure you will come out all right. Doctors can do a heap nowadays. One of them fixed up my nephew, Jed Perkins, last seed time. He had the blind staggers, an'——"

She was interrupted by a shrill warning whistle from the engine. Then the long line of heavy coaches quivered and trembled with the retarding pressure of air brakes.

Immediately following came a sudden jolt, and the train stopped.

The shock was sufficient to cause the lights to go out, and from the darkness came a series of groans, indicating that some unlucky passenger had been thrown from his seat.

Windows were hastily raised, and heads poked out, in feverish anxiety to ascertain the cause of the accident.

The gentleman across the aisle was the first to find out the truth.

Raising his voice until it rang above the moans and ejaculations of the frightened passengers, he exclaimed:

"We have been stopped by a gang of train robbers! They are gathered near the baggage car, and there seems to be a score of them."

As if to prove the truth of his assertion, a shot sounded spitefully on the night air, and a blood-curdling scream of agony came from outside.

The old lady uttered a feeble shriek of terror and tried to crawl under her seat.

"Land's sakes!" she wailed. "We will all be killed. Can't some of you big men git out an' drive them away?"

Her suggestion passed unheeded. None in that coach felt like risking their lives in the effort.

Suddenly a voice called out from the other end:

"If we could only send word back to Crownville, the people there would organize a party and capture the villains. The station cannot be more than two miles away."

"I will go," exclaimed Dicky's interpreter courageously. "It is our only——"

"Stay whar ye air, if ye value your skin!"

The dim light of a bull's-eye lantern flashed unexpectedly on the scene, revealing a man clad in rough garments standing close to the end door.

He held a revolver in one hand, and, as he spoke, pointed the muzzle at the one who had just volunteered.

"If any feller moves a finger in this here car, I'll bore him fuller of holes than a tin skimmer! Git back in that seat, there! What! Ye won't! Then——"

Bang! Bang!

The pistol shots rang through the crowded apartment with a suddenness that caused every one to dodge in terror.

"Blast the kid; he's escaped! But he won't git far, as I winged him, sure."

"Yes, consarn ye! You have killed a pore little boy, an' if I was only a man I'd make ye pay fur it!" wrathfully retorted the old lady, rising from her seat.

She would have undoubtedly attacked the astonished villain if some sensible hand had not caught her by the dress.

Crouched on the floor, she had seen Dicky Adams, the dumb boy, slyly edge toward the open window, and, just as the train robber was uttering his warning, the lad made a sudden dash and crept through the opening.

The scoundrel's quick eye had seen him, however, and the two shots were fired in his direction.

Carried beside herself by what she thought was the deliberate murder of a defenseless lad, the motherly old dame sprang to the rescue, with the result just stated.

But what of Dicky?

A warm red spot on the edge of the window sill indicated that he had been wounded, at least; but his body was gone—dropped sheer from the opening to the ground beneath.

He was not dead, however; there was life enough left in the mite of a lad to carry aid to the besieged train, and this is how he did it:

When the man in the rear of the coach stated that help could be secured from a town only two miles away, Dicky instantly resolved to make the attempt.

Starting to his feet, the boy was just in the act of stepping into the aisle when he saw the light and heard the robber's speech.

Quick as a flash, he jumped for the nearest window, but had hardly reached it when the reports sounded, and he felt a sharp pain in his shoulder.

Nothing daunted, the brave boy leaped through the opening and landed on his side in a pile of cinders.

The shock was sufficient to slightly stun him, but, recovering almost immediately, Dicky turned and ran down the track at the top of his speed.

Stumbling over ties, slipping in the loose heaps of dirt, narrowly escaping a dozen falls in open cattle guards, he went; and, at last, just when his strength was failing, he saw ahead the gleaming red light of the station.

What followed is best told in the language of the agent.

He was dozing over his instrument when a loud rapping at the outside door awakened him.

Hastily throwing it open, he saw a little figure crouched in a half-kneeling position on the step. By the light of the room lamp the astounded man discerned a dark-red stain on the shabby coat, and knew that he had a sensation at hand.

To his imperative question, he elicited no response. Fearing that his strange visitor was dead, he hurriedly picked him up and carried the lad inside.

The mere sight have acted as a stimulant, for just as he reached the centre of the room the boy broke away and rushed toward a desk in one corner.

Seizing a pencil, he scrawled something on a sheet of blank paper and then fell to the floor once more.

It did not take long for the dumfounded man to read the message. It said:

"Train being robbed up track. Send help, qui——"

Luckily the agent was one accustomed to meet emergencies. Leaving the room with a bound, he ran frantically from house to house of the little village, and soon had a score of armed men loaded on two hand-cars.

Leaving the resident doctor to look after the brave messenger, he assumed command of the forces and hurried to the scene of attack.

All this had taken time, and if it had not been for a difficulty in forcing open the express safe they would have arrived too late.

On nearing the vicinity, the men quietly left the cars and crept on ahead.

The first intimation the robbers had of trouble was a volley of shots that mowed down the greater part of the gang.

The balance were so surprised that they were easily captured, and soon all that remained to show that a daring attempt had been made to rob the night express were several handcuffed villains and a crowd of chattering passengers.

Among the latter was the old lady.

Seizing the first opportunity, she asked after lad, and, on being told that he was back at the station, insisted on being conveyed there at once.

The engine had only received slight damages when it struck the obstruction placed on the tracks, so started back with the train.

In a very few moments the room where Dicky had been laid was the scene of much excitement. The grateful passengers insisted on being permitted to see the little hero, and the surgeon had to drive them out with bodily force.

They were appeased, however, by the welcome announcement that he was doing well and would speedily recover.

The old lady was the only one he could not get rid of. She declared she was going to nurse the boy, and, as a proof, planted herself at the head of the stretcher with such a defiant air that the doctor gave in.

She found Dicky still insensible, but shortly after she arrived he showed signs of reviving.

Bending over him she was just in the act of applying a stimulant when he opened his eyes and essayed to speak.

At first the sounds were meaningless, and the words, when formed, ran into each other like the prattle of a lisping child, but as last he made a great effort, and, clear and distinct, came the question:

"Was I in time? Have the robbers been captured?"

Astounded beyond measure, the old lady stared at Dicky as if in a dream; then, speaking slowly and solemnly, she said:

"It's his reward; it's his reward."

After the excitement was over, the doctor went into a long and scientific explanation of the cause of Dicky's recover from dumbness, stating that it was due to excitement and the shock of the wound; but his words did not change the old lady's idea that it was a reward for his bravery.

Both may have been right.

THE GIRL PILOT.

By H. H. CARR.

A hurricane was lashing the ocean into terrific madness; the howling wind, driving black clouds athwart the sky, seemed to be freighted with destructive strength.

Standing in a cupola on one of the great warehouses of Key West was a group of bronzed wreckers, an old pilot, and a young, very beautiful girl.

A half-dozen spyglasses were in use, all pointed toward what, through them, could be plainly seen to be a dismantled ship, drifting in slowly, but surely, toward some reefs to the eastward of the channel that led in from the gulf, past Sand Key Light, to the Key West harbor.

"Will she strike the Samboes?" asked one of the wreckers.

"Yes," said the old pilot, "I reckon, yes; though she may go on farther up, abreast the Saddle Hills. She never will keep out up as far as Loo Key."

"Father, that ship could be saved. She can yet set sail ough forward—for her foremast is standing—to get steerageway, and there are plenty of channels by which she can it to an anchorage inside the reef."

It was little Florence Starr who spoke—only fifteen, yet a womanly.

"Yes, gal, she could be saved, if I was aboard of her and wanted to keep her out of the wreckers' hands, which isn't always my rule."

"Father, go out and save her. Your boat lies at the wharf. The sail is already reefed down to its smallest size. I can hoist it and tend the sheet. Go out, and, even if you can but hail her and tell them to follow you, we can show them a channel."

"You're crazy, child. What are they to us, that I should run the risk? Let them come ashore. The wreckers will get the cargo."

"But the lives, father; the lives!"

"What are they to us? They are no relations of ours who are on yonder ship!"

"They are related to somebody. If you will not try to save them, I will!"

The wreckers laughed. The idea of that slight girl attempting to do anything in such a sea and such a gale was, to them, only laughable.

It was twenty minutes later, and they had just sent one of their number down to bring them up something to drink, when the old pilot, with a face blanched white, and a husky voice, groaned out:

"Oh, Heaven, there goes my girl alone! She is mad! She is mad! She will be lost!"

And, looking down to where he pointed, they saw, with wondering eyes, his small, sharp-built pilot boat, with only her balance-reefed foresail set, and her deck fairly flooded with the white water through which she drove, steering out of the harbor directly toward the dismasted vessel.

"The boat will founder—it cannot live!" groaned the old pilot. "She is mad! I must lose my child!"

He clasped his great rough hands over his eyes, and, with a shuddering moan, sank down upon a stool which they placed for him.

Meantime the wreckers watched her, as, standing lashed to the tiller of the boat, that angel of a girl steered out in the terrible turmoil of wind and water.

We will now repair to the ship for a little while.

There were precious lives on her decks. Her captain, who knew better than any one else the peril—the almost utter hopelessness of his situation, looked with a grieving heart on a young wife now taking her first, and, he believed it would be her last, voyage with him.

And his passengers, thirty-one in all; and his crew, lacking but one of the same number—sixty-three souls in all on that doomed ship, and not a chance for life. Oh, it was terrible to think of.

Mute, looking to him, and to the distant shore and the wild surf breaking all too near, they all stood, clinging to the bulwarks and rigging, feeling that the end, the dark and fearful end, was but a brief space away.

All at once the eyes of the young wife caught sight of a speck on the waters. At first she thought it was a white-winged bird; then she saw it was a boat.

She pointed it out to her husband.

Quickly his glass was scanning its appearance.

"It is a pilot boat. There must be hope, or it would not venture out," he cried. "Mates, if we can get but a yard of canvas set forward we can get steerageway on the ship. Try it, for your lives, try it!"

Oh, what courage, what strength will rise up from despair, when hope whispers there is a chance!

The crew, officers, and men sprang forward, and though the strong wind blew them about as if they were but wooden toys, and the waves washed over them, they worked manfully until a close-reefed storm staysail was set.

Then four good men at the double wheel found that the ship had steerageway, and could luff, or keep away, as the captain ordered.

And now, on—sometimes seen on the crest of a wave, again disappearing from view in a watery valley—came the little boat, until it was close under the stern of the great ship; and the captain wondered all the more when he saw the beautiful girl who steered it, and who seemed to be alone on the deck.

"Follow me and you will find a channel deep enough to lead to an anchorage inside the reef, among the islands," she cried, in a voice so loud and shrill that he heard it above the shrieking gale and the dash of waters.

"Aye, aye! Heaven bless you! Aye, aye!" he shouted in return, as the little boat shot by the ship.

The helmsmen steered as he bade them, while he watched his lovely guide; and crew and passengers stood breathless and thankful, praying that they might be saved. And now she was seen standing boldly in toward breakers which lashed the reefs with fearful force.

On—swiftly on, until she seemed in her tiny boat about to be swallowed up in the raging surf—yet she was not dismayed.

"She is in it; she is lost, and we also," the captain groaned; but the next instant his ship, instead of being in the breakers, was gliding through a channel hardly twice her breadth, and so deep it did not break in it. And his eyes were on her boat, already in smooth water and changing its course toward a group of islands but a few miles off on the lee-bow.

"Thank Heaven, and the pilot it has sent to us! We are saved!" cried the captain, as he looked back at the dreadful surf through which they had passed.

And he and his crew, and the passengers, too, knelt and breathed out their thanks to Him who had spared them even when all hope was gone.

An hour later and the great ship was at anchor, and Florence Starr was on her deck modestly refusing any pay for the great good she had done.

"They said you could not be saved!" she exclaimed. "But I felt that I could save you, and I am so glad I have!"

Soon after the girl pilot reached the shore, where her father and the wreckers were glad to receive her.

TELLING THE TRUTH.

A young fellow riding down a steep hill, doubting if the foot of it was boggish, called out to a man that was ditching, and asked if it was hard at the bottom.

"Aye," answered the countryman, "it is hard enough at the bottom, I warrant you."

But in half a dozen steps, the horse sank up to the saddle-girths, which made the young gallant whip, and spur, and utter oaths.

"You rascal," said he to the ditcher, "didst thou not tell me that it was hard at the bottom?"

"Aye," said the ditcher; "but you are not halfway to the bottom yet."

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